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SUMMER ISSUE

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NO RANGE FOR AN OUTCAST

By LEE FLOREN

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★ ALL STORIES NEW! ★

Volume 6 ★ ★ Summer, 1944 ★ ★ Number 4

TEN COMPLETE WESTERN STORIES

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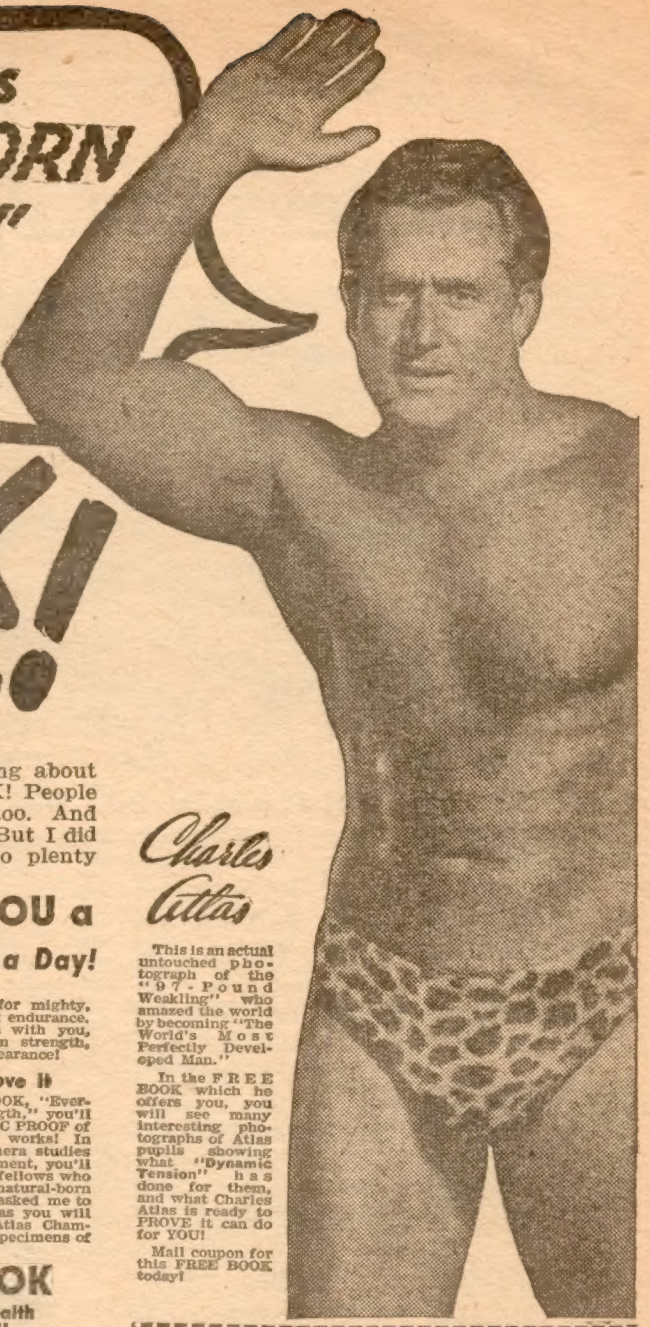
They Said I Was "A NATURAL-BORN WEAKLING" and that Nothing Could be Done About It!

BUNK!



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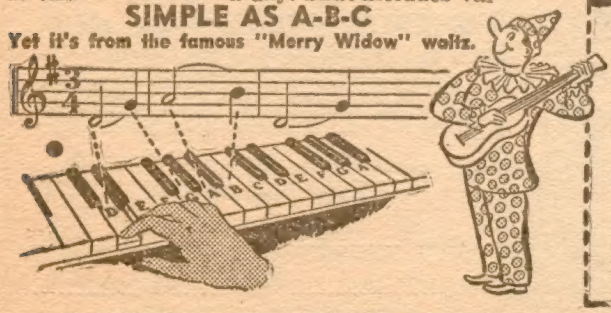

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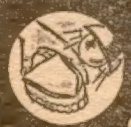

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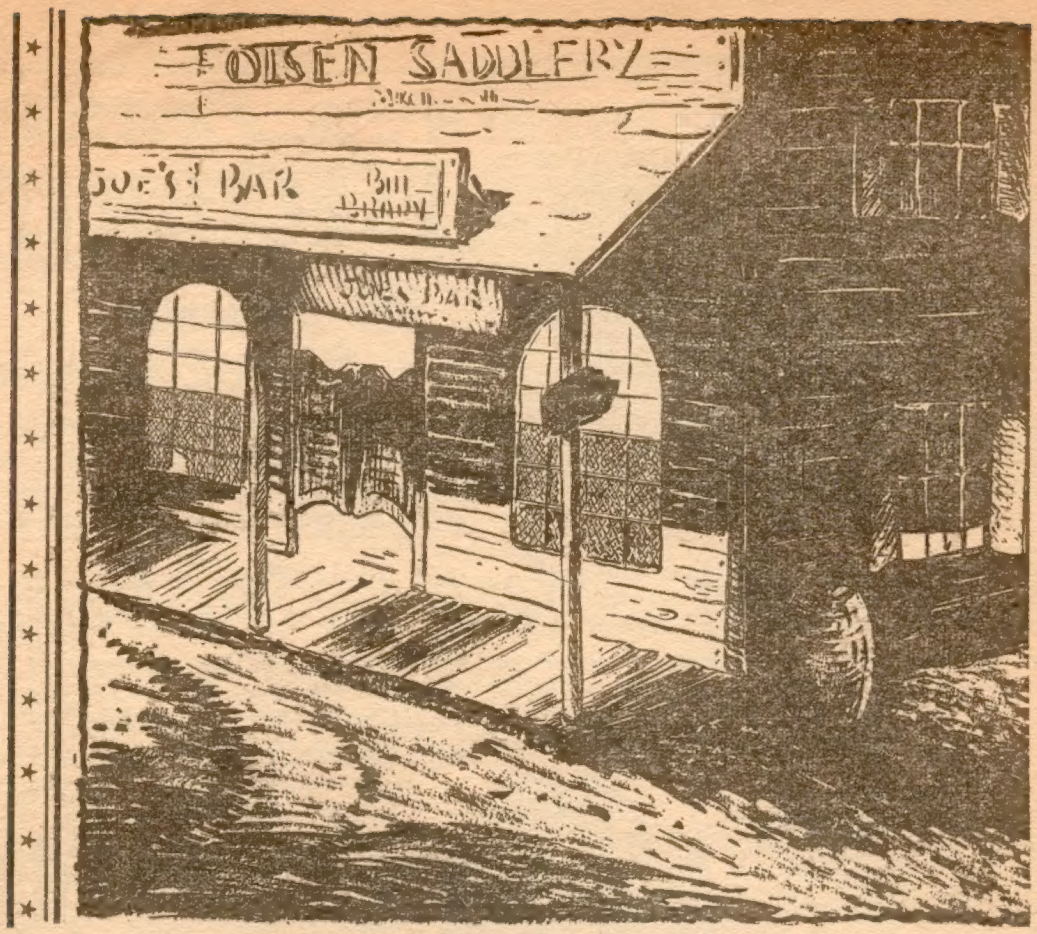

Jim saw the deputy jerk upright as the horse plunged forward.

NO RANGE FOR AN OUTCAST

Complete Action-Packed Novelet

By Lee Floren

(author of "No Guns for Hire," "The Boothill Buckaroo," etc.)

Jim Graham came back from the wild bunch to find his home a desolate, and broken down thing. And old Hank Graham sat in his chair, helpless, more dead than alive.

OLD HANK GRAHAM was blind because his brain had broken down and left him, at sixty, a grayed and beaten man, moving each day deeper into a living death. Grizzled and shaggy, he sat in a homemade rawhide chair, his sightless eyes staring at Jim Graham. Jim spoke louder this time.

"Hello, dad," he said.

Still, those eyes showed no recognition; only Hank Graham's gnarled right hand—the hand that clutched the diamond-willow cane — showed any sign of life. Jim glanced at that hard-knuckled hand and a strong feeling ran through him. And, min-

gled with this feeling, was a touch of anger.

Jim knelt beside old Hank. He was a big man, too, and his shoulders were heavy. Although only in his middle twenties, his dark hair had touches of gray. His face was flat, pitiless; it showed that he had lived by his guns.

He laid his hand on the hand of his father. His hand, too, was gnarled; the bones stood out, big and strong. Old Hank's sightless eyes bored down on him. When Jim spoke his voice was heavy with emotion.

"I'm Jim, dad, your son; I've come home. Do you hear me, Hank? Answer me."

A tense moment followed. Suddenly died. The gaunt lips moved but no words came. Then old Hank Graham drew his hands over his face and started moaning.

Jim got to his feet. The sounds were weird; they were lonesome, whining. They were torn in mental anguish from a man doomed to a living death. They were the moans of a dumb, tortured animal—an animal without reason, without hope. They shrivelled every fiber of Jim Graham's hardness.

But Jim was a strong man, and his lips were stony. He waited for the spasm to stop; finally, it passed. The hands of Hank Graham fell lifelessly downward; yet the eyes were without sanity.

Jim walked to the doorway. Outside the Montana sun lay like gold across the green grass of the Beaver creek country, but Jim had no eyes for this beauty. He spoke to the woman beside the window.

"I think he recognized me once."

The woman spoke brokenly. She was a Norwegian. "Sometimes I think he gets better—each night I pray—"

"What does Doc Deming say about him?"

"The doctor worked with him for a while, right after the accident. Sometimes I think he did good, though. But Les Mitchell sent away for some medicine; he takes that each day." She shook her head sadly.

"Where is that medicine?"

She waddled across the room and opened a drawer. The pills were huge white things. Jim rolled one in his hand and then pocketed it.

"Your name is—?"

"Sonya Nelson. My man, Hans, rides for the Bar V. I suppose the Bar Y is your brand now that you are home. We've been here five years. We came right after you left an' right before Les Mitchell came as foreman. You've never met Les Mitchell?"

"No. How long, then, has dad been this way?"

"Right after Mitchell came he got that way. He didn't come home that night, and we found him against the rocks. His horse had thrown him and his brain. . ."

"Then his eyes are all right?"

"Yes, but his brain isn't; something about the optic nerve bein' paralyzed."

"But he should have got over that."

"That's what Doc Deming said; but he never comes anymore since Les Mitchell told him to stay away."

JIM went outside. He heard a magpie scolding in the willows. He looked at the scattered buildings comprising the Bar V; the place was dilapidated, run down. Once it had been a mighty, arrogant spread.

He went to the barn. It had been staunch, big; now the ridgepole sagged, it was swaybacked. No black, well-oiled harnesses hung on the pegs now. These were scuffed brown straps of ill-patched leather.

A team munched slough hay from a manger. They were bony, homely broncs—ill-bred stock. Far cry from the sleek Percherons who had once stood on the same spot.

The hen-house roof had caved in on one end; scraggly hens scrutinized him through sharp eyes. The horse-corral needed new bars and posts. Eight shaggy cowponies stood inside gazing out at the green pasture. Jim turned them outside.

They fell to grazing. Jim watched them, an anger growing. Something was sadly amiss on the Bar V. Les Mitchell had run the place into the

ground. There was no call for these horses to be starving in a corral.

Jim went to the blacksmith shop. The bull-wheel of a broken mowing-machine blocked the door but he shoved it aside. There was an oil can on the bench. It was dry. He found a gallon can of oil.

The windmill was squeaking. He climbed the steel ladder and oiled the bearings; the squeaking stopped. But the bearing had been cut bad, and the driveshaft wobbled.

From this high point, he looked out over the surrounding country. Meadows stretched north until they met the brown foothills. The blue-joint on those meadows should have been cut and stacked for winter feed, but he could not see a team and mower working. Soon the hay would have to be cut or snow would cover it.

That afternoon, on his ride out from Beaver City, Jim had read the brands of the cattle he encountered. Most of them bore the Square Diamond, not the Bar V. Clay Metrick, a stranger to him, owned the Square Diamond.

Clay Metrick also owned the bank in Beaver City. Jim had seen him in town. Metrick was a heavy-set, bull-necked man, tough and arrogant. A tough man, Jim figured, to cross.

But Jim did know this: a Bar V could be changed to a Square Diamond. Get a hot running-iron and make a box or square out of the bar, insert another V on top of the old V and make a diamond. Jim's flat-cheekboned face grew harder. He squatted beside the bunkhouse and waited.

Many thoughts tormented him. Old Hank sat inside the house, his eyes sightless, his brain disintegrating. Hank with a tongue that could not speak, with eyes that could not see. Had he known of his father's condition, Jim would have been home years before.

Sonya came across the yard and said, "The men are comin' home. I saw them from an upstairs window." She was silent and then she added, "Mitchell is a tough man, Jim Graham."

Jim got a-foot. He said quietly, "Thanks."

She turned and walked into the house. Now four riders loped into the yard. A thin man, tall and lanky, rode in their lead. He wore a gaudy buckskin jacket. Immaculately creased pants were pushed into polished Justin halfboots. His face was hard, lean. He wore two guns, tied down guns.

The others were run-of-the-mill cowhands—men who'd shaped their lives and their legs to the way of a horse. Jim recognized Hans Nelson by his thin blue eyes, his sparse blond hair. Jim walked forward.

"Who's Les Mitchell?" he asked.

The thin man said, "I am. Who are you?"

"I'm Jim Graham."

MITCHELL looked at him for a moment and then said, "Ol' Hank's son, huh?" He loosened his latigo strap. "Got any proof?"

"Some of the neighbors'll know me. An' I might have a letter or two in my saddlebags. I'm takin' over the outfit, Mitchell."

"An' where does that put me?"

"That puts you out."

Mitchell's breath caught, and held. Jim ran his eyes over the other Bar V punchers. They were just hired hands; they wanted no part of this. Of the three, only Hans Nelson showed emotion. The Norwegian's eyes were bright.

Mitchell asked, "An' what if I don't go?"

"You'll ride out," said Jim Graham, "or they'll carry you out."

Mitchell stripped the gear from his horse. He dropped the saddle and his voice was low. "I've worked here a long time, Graham. I've run this spread ever since old Hank got sick an'—"

"An' you ran it in the ground," finished Jim Graham.

Mitchell's voice was harsh. "Then why wasn't you home to run it instead of travelin' with a wild bunch?" His hands were on his guns, his knuckles white against the black grips.

"I'll leave your time at the Mint saloon," said Jim Graham. "Now get your own horse and head out."

"I'm not goin'!"

Les Mitchell was pulling his guns. Jim saw that the man was fast. Jim probably could have beat him but he struck instead. His right knuckles smashed against Mitchell's jaw. A hard left, rocking in, sent Mitchell staggering.

Mitchell's right-hand gun was rising. Jim stepped in and they fought for it. Despite Mitchell's thin build, the man was strong. Jim used every ounce of strength he owned. Finally he got Mitchell's arm around and the man's fingers relaxed. The .45 fell to the ground; when Jim stepped back his own guns were out.

He said, "Don't pull your other gun, Mitchell!"

A trickle of blood formed on Mitchell's mouth. He wiped it away. He stood there for a long moment, his eyes filled with hate. Jim took the man's other gun and kicked the bullets out of it; he did the same to the gun Mitchell had dropped.

"Pack your duds and ride out!"

Mitchell nodded slowly, "All right, Graham." He went into the bunk-house. Jim Graham studied the three Bar V riders. He said, "You men stayin'?"

"I'm hangin' on," murmured Hans Nelson.

One said, "I'm ridin' out, Graham." The other, too, said he would go. Jim told them they could ride Bar V horses into Beaver City and then leave them at the livery-barn. One of them looked at Hans Nelson.

"You comin' with us, Hans?"

"No."

"You're liable to get into trouble, Hans. In fact, you might get killed."

Jim glanced at Nelson. There was something here he didn't understand, some subtlety was passing between these men. The rider's quiet voice held a definite threat to Nelson. Yet Nelson, if he realized it, paid no heed. His gaunt Nordic face was expressionless.

"Maybe you're right," he acknowledged. "An' maybe you ain't. . ."

JIM and Hans went into the house. Sonya had supper on the table. She had already fed old Hank and helped him into bed. They ate in silence. The food was good, cooked excellently. Jim looked up twice. The first time was when Mitchell and his two men pulled out, heading toward Beaver City. The second was when the girl stood in the doorway.

"Hello, Jim," she said.

Jim looked at her for a long time and then he smiled. "Hello, Birdie. Or say, are you Birdie Holmes?"

She laughed then, and her laugh was full-toned, healthy. The years had changed her from a girl into a woman. She was, Jim thought, about twenty-one, now. That thought was disturbing; most girls were married by the time they reached that age.

"How's the husband?" he asked.

She said, "The one I haven't got? Oh, he's fine. But Jim, aren't you going to invite me to eat with you?"

Jim got a-foot. "Grab a seat." He tried to make his voice gay, but it was still husky. She sat opposite him. She said, "You've changed a little, Jim."

He said, "Time changes all men." He knew he had changed. He had been a kid, then; now he was a man—his guns marked his life and his face. His face was hard and flat and the killer brand was there. "Your father?" he asked.

"He an' Mother are both gone," she said.

There was a silence. "Are you home to stay?" she asked.

"Yes."

"That's good," she said. "We need you, Jim."

Sonya broke the tension with her laugh. "Every time she asked about you, Jim. Every time she saw me—"

Birdie said hurriedly, "Oh, Sonya!"

That started the conversation rolling. Birdie was running her father's ranch, the Six Bar Nine. And, despite her gay talk, Jim read beneath the lines. The way had been hard for this girl, too.

But under all their talk, light though it seemed, ran a serious un-

dertone. Jim sensed it and probed into it. He learned that Clay Metrick's outfit, the Square Diamond, had been in the valley for about five years. The story was an old one to Jim. On many ranges, and in many towns, he had seen the same thing happen.

"Did Les Mitchell have much to do with Clay Metrick?"

Hans Nelson answered. "They have been seen together a number of times, Jim, but that can't prove nothin'."

Jim's gaze was level. "Did you ever see Mitchell or any Bar V men change a Bar V brand into a Square Diamond?"

"No."

"Are you sure of that?"

Hans Nelson said, "Don't accuse me of stealin' Bar V cattle, Graham. I've took a hell of a lot of abuse off'n Mitchell. There has been plenty of times that I almost came ridin' away from the Bar V. Only Sonya kept me here; Sonya an' ol' Hank. We were the only people your father had on earth to watch after him. An' we couldn't go off an' leave ol' Hank. . ."

Jim's throat caught. He had a vision then of old Hank—old Hank with eyes that could not see, a tongue that could not talk.

"I never meant it that way, Hans. But you musta rid with Mitchell an' his men on roundup."

"Never," said Hans Nelson. "I was always ordered to stay at the home ranch an' do the chores. Hell, I'm plenty suspicious, too. Once I watched them from a hill through glasses, but they were too far away."

Jim pushed back his chair. He was silent momentarily. Then he said, "The play is simple. Mitchell's been workin' with Metrick. They've been tryin' to break the Bar V an' then buy it for a song. Come on, Nelson."

They saddled fresh horses; Birdie rode with them. Three miles below the ranch, on the level country, they found a small herd of Square Diamond steers. They were native four-year-olds, big steers.

THE long northern twilight lay across the country. They choused the steers into the corral and Jim dismounted. He pulled his Winchester .30-30 rifle from its saddle-boot and spoke to Birdie.

"This won't be nice to look at, girl."

"I've seen a beef butchered before," she reminded him.

Jim walked around the steers, studying them. One brute seemed to satisfy his curiosity. Hans chased the rest of the steers into another corral leaving the one animal alone. Jim raised his rifle and shot. The beef's knees ran out from under him and he hit the ground dead.

Hans Nelson bled the brute. Jim worked with a skinning knife. He peeled the hide from the critter. Darkness came in and Sonya lighted a lantern. Jim sprawled the hide over the corral bars and studied the inside of it, opposite the brand. Sonya brought the lantern closer.

Jim scraped the inside of the hide with his knife. He wore it down until he could see the dim outline of the brand. He and Hans Nelson studied it for some time. There was a faint smile on Jim's lips.

"We killed the wrong critter, Hans."

Hans Nelson nodded wordlessly. He knew what Jim was looking for. When you rebrand a steer, regardless of how carefully you do it, some traces of the old brand always shows through when you skin the hide. This steer had been branded only once—and that brand had been the Square Diamond.

"Well," said Jim, tonelessly, "Clay Metrick could have us for rustlin' now. We jus' killed one of his steers. Let's try another, Hans. We can cut the meat up an' hang it in the ice-house. We'll bury the hide someplace an' Metrick'll never know the difference."

"I'll pick this one," said Nelson.

The Norwegian went into the corral and drove in another steer. The brute smelled blood and pawed the ground. Jim's bullet dropped him in his tracks. They skinned him and scraped that hide. Sonya held the lantern behind the brand, making it

stand out clearly. Jim heard Birdie gasp.

Jim's hunch had paid off.

"That steer was originally branded with the Bar V," he said. "Then he was re-branded the Square Diamond. They burned a wet-blanket brand on him, see the outline of the original V?"

"No wonder they never let me ride on roundup," said Hans Nelson.

"It's a wonder they didn't kill you because of what little you do know. You was invitin' death every minute you stayed on the Bar V."

"We both knew that," said Sonya quietly. "But we had to stay because of your dad, Jim. We couldn't leave him—"

Jim said softly, "Thanks, Sonya."

They quartered the beeves and hung them in the ice-house. Jim buried the first hide and folded the second so that the brand was on top. He tied the bloody hide behind his saddle. He felt in his vest pocket. He still had the pill Sonya had given him; the pill his father had been taking. Birdie asked where he was going.

"Into Beaver City," he said. "I'm turnin' this brand over to the stock-inspector there."

"I'm ridin' with you," said Nelson.

Jim spoke to Sonya. "Don't feed my father any more of those pills that Mitchell ordered for him. I'm takin' this one into town for Doc Deming to look at. You better stay with Sonya, Birdie."

"I'm going with you," said Birdie.

Jim glanced at her. She was beautiful as she sat her bay gelding—slim and thin and with golden hair. He looked at her for some time and he felt something move inside of him.

"We might run into some trouble," he said drily.

JIM'S horse objected to the bloody cowhide. He tried to buck but Jim held him strongly. Two hours later they rode into Beaver City. Jim studied the cowtown, building a visual map of it, storing this in his mind against possible future use. Hans Nelson asked what the first move was.

"Never chase a man you're after," replied Jim. "Let him come to you, does that make sense?"

"Not good sense."

There was a light in the rear of the bank. Clay Metrick lived back there, said Hans Nelson. A few horses were tied to hitchracks but Jim did not see Les Mitchell's horse. Nor did he see the horses of the two former Bar V men who had ridden away with Mitchell.

The county seat was some forty miles to the east. Therefore, there was only a deputy sheriff in Beaver City. He was, according to Birdie, the local stock inspector. They dismounted in front of his shack and Jim carried the hide inside. The deputy was a short bowlegged man with close-set eyes.

Jim introduced himself. "I've got a hide here I'd like to have you look at," he said.

"Spill it on the floor; you can't dirty up the place." The deputy looked at the brand. "You been killin' off Clay Metrick's Square Diamond cattle?"

"Look at the back of that brand?"

The deputy did; he raised puzzled eyes. "What about it?"

"That steer was originally branded with my Bar V iron. Somebody's run a Square Diamon' over my brand with a wet blanket. See the outlines of the original V?"

The deputy got to his feet. "That'll be hard to prove. The hot iron mighta slipped and caused that scar." He shook his head. "Not much evidence there, Graham."

"It'll stand in court," said Jim. "It has before."

Boots sounded on the steps outside. They turned as Clay Metrick entered. The cowman-banker nodded to Birdie and Hans Nelson. He deliberately overlooked Jim and spoke to the deputy.

"Never knew you had company, Burt, or I wouldn't have dropped in. But I thought maybe you an' me'd start a seven-up game."

Jim Graham said evenly, "You're not a very good liar, Metrick. You saw us ride into town. Then you snooped over here to see what we were doin'."

Metrick's eyes were cold. "Who are you?"

"You know who I am. Les Mitchell's prob'ly told you by now. See that hide there? That hide came off'n one of your Square Diamond critters. I killed him an' skinned him."

"That's rustlin' my beef," said Metrick. "I could send you to the pen for that."

"But that ain't your beef," corrected Jim. "Your Square Diamond brand has been run over my Bar V iron."

Jim's eyes never left Metrick's. They were two big men—quietly reserved men—but there was anger under each. Metrick's thick lips held a smile but Jim knew the banker was inwardly disturbed. This man was hard, strong; he was steel. But when Metrick spoke, his words were directed toward the deputy.

"You lettin' this gent get a warrant for my arrest, Burt?"

"Not on that evidence."

Metrick looked at Jim. "Now where do you stand, Graham? Or shall I swear out a warrant for you chargin' you with butcherin' my steer?"

Jim glanced at the deputy. The deputy wiped his forehead; plainly, he was worried. For years he had held down a soft job. Now, war was facing Beaver creek valley, the deputy was between two fires, and he was worried.

"Who'd serve the warrant?" asked Jim softly.

The deputy said soothingly, "Why not call the whole thing off, men? Graham here jus' got off on the wrong foot, Metrick. He's made a mistake. You've got plenty of cattle—you could spare a steer."

"You backin' water?" asked Metrick.

"No—but—"

"Write out that warrant!"

"Ah, call it off, I tell you."

Metrick repeated, "Write out that warrant, Burt!"

THE deputy said then, "T'hell with you both! You've buffaloed all the people hereabouts, Metrick, but you ain't bulldozin' me! The job ain't worth it. I'm packin' my warbag an' ridin' over the ridge." He went to his bunk and pulled a suitcase from under it. He jammed dirty shirts into it.

Jim Graham had to smile. "Then I'll take this hide to the county seat, Metrick."

Metrick moved into the open doorway, his hands on his guns. His voice was low. "You'll never get that hide to the sheriff, Graham...."

Jim studied him under lidded eyes. There was anger inside of him, but he held it. Metrick read Jim's eyes; he saw Jim's shoulders move. Metrick started his guns up, then held them, the lips slightly over holster edges. Jim saw, then, a touch of fear in Metrick's eyes. For a moment it was there, naked and visible, and then it was gone. And Metrick let him own guns drop back.

"You're a fast hand with your guns, Graham."

"I'm keepin' this hide, Metrick. Keepin' it for evidence. An' somethin' else, too, fella. Next time you go for your guns with me be ready to use them!"

Metrick nodded. "I'll do that...." He wheeled then and turned into the night. Jim heard his bootheels pound away and die in the night. He looked at Birdie. Her eyes were on him. There was fear in them, but Jim realized, suddenly, it was not fear of Clay Metrick.

He realized, then, that her eyes were on his guns. He looked down at them. They jutted forward, their hammers back. Slowly, he let the hammers sink. He sheathed the unfired guns. The fear left her eyes.

He understood, now. She was afraid of his guns, afraid of them because they were so fast, so deadly. Afraid that someday they would be the cause of his death. And he knew now, as he had only guessed before, that Birdie loved him.

He looked at Hans Nelson. Nelson's pale Nordic eyes were expressionless. He looked, too, at the deputy; the man's eyes were livid with fear.

The deputy said, "Now I know I'm really leavin'!"

THEY went to the livery-barn. The hostler had a side-room with a lock on it, and Jim stored the hide there. Puzzled thoughts ran through him. He was not used to using the law as an instrument to even accounts with the enemy. His usual manner was to rely on his fists or his guns.

But he had ridden home to stay; and, if a man aims to stay in one place long, he has to live by the letter of the law, not by his own impulses. His reputation in Beaver City was none too savory anyway. He had fought and drunk too often in its saloons, his guns had spoken too many times.

His brain, agile and bright, went ahead and sought a solution to this problem. Somehow, he would make Clay Metrick come to him, come with smoking guns. But in what manner should he bring this about?

Then there was also Les Mitchell. Mitchell was somewhere in Beaver City because his bronc was in the barn. The horses of the other two former Bar V riders were also there.

"But them two men ain't in town," said the hostler. "They left word at the Mint to have their checks sent to Great Falls. Figure they went up there to see the lights for a while."

"They'll never come back," said Jim, smiling.

Jim wrote out two checks on the county seat bank and the hostler said he would take them to the Mint. Birdie asked him about Les Mitchell's check, thinking Jim had forfotten it.

"No use writin' him a check," said Jim. "I don't figger he'll ever live to cash it."

Birdie's eyes showed alarm. "Then you think—?"

"What else can Mitchell an' Metrick do? They behin' the eight ball an' they ain't got no chalk for their cues. They'll have to move against me or draw back their horns. An' they sure won't do that; there's too much at stake."

"They won't pull back," assured Hans Nelson. The Nordic licked his lips. "I think I'll drop down to the Sagebrush Bar an' get a drink. You comin', Jim."

Jim shook his head. "Watch your backtrail, Nels."

"I sure will, Jim."

Jim and Birdie went to Doc Deming's office, but the office was dark, so they went to the medico's home. The thin man and his gray-haired wife greeted Jim warmly. The sincerity of their welcame brought a sense of happiness to Jim.

"How's old Hank?"

Jim explained his father's condition. Doc Deming shook his head slowly. "Hank should have come out of that fall by now," he admitted. "He had a minor skull fracture above the *medulla* that should have cleared up rapidly."

Jim showed him the pill. The medico rolled it in his long sensitive finger, his forehead grooved. "What do you want me to do with this?"

"Can you take it apart and see what it's made of?"

The doctor's eyes were sharp. "You mean—you think—?"

Jim shrugged. "A hunch, doc, no more."

The medico glanced at his wife. The woman was plainly worried; her motherly face showed it. Jim knew what was bothering her. By analyzing the contents of that pill, her husband was moving directly against Mitchell and Metrick.

"All right," the medico finally said. "We'll have to take it to my office, though."

"I'll stay with Mrs. Deming," said Birdie.

THE doctor put on his coat and, unnoticed by his wife, he rummaged through a drawer, coming out with a .38 revolver. He put this in his pocket and he and Jim left. When they were going down the street, Jim saw Les Mitchell leave the sidewalk and step into a saloon. Mitchell, he knew, had seen them coming. The man was shadowing Jim for Clay Metrick.

The fall chill had settled and the small office was cold. Jim lighted a fire in the pot-bellied stove and soon had dry pine wood crackling. Doc Deming warmed his thin hands over the flame.

Jim said, "If this gets you into trouble, doc, I'll get you through it."

Deming smiled. "Thanks, Jim."

The doctor went to work, then. He broke the capsule open and lay its powdery contents on a flat stone. He took a pinch of it between forceps and held it over the heat of the kerosene lamp. Jim watched the powder shrivel. Jim had already pulled the blinds low. He checked them to make sure nobody could see in from the outside.

The medico worked for almost two hours. He made acid tests, litmus tests, and other tests, and Jim watched. Slowly the chemical symbols jotted down on the paper became a long list.

They were working when they heard the hoofbeats coming down Beaver City's mainstreet. The medico was nervous; he stopped working. He stood there, tall and tense against the lamplight.

"Just a puncher leaving town," said Jim.

Nevertheless, fearing some new danger, Jim slipped out the back door. He stepped into an alley as dark as the inside of a black stetson. He moved toward the street, coming in between two buildings. Hidden there by the darkness, he stood with both guns jutting.

Save for the lone horseman moving down the street, the thoroughfare was deserted. This horseman rode fast, his big dun at a gallop. The lights in the saloons threw rectangular squares of lights across the street and, when the rider rode through these, Jim recognized him as the deputy.

True to his promise, the deputy was rabbiting. He was leaving this town, for soon he knew the guns would roar. His life was his own—the open trail stretched ahead; he had a stout horse between his legs, and hot whiskey in his belly. He raised his voice and whooped. That was the last sound his lips ever released.

Now a rifle spoke from an upstairs window in the hotel. It sang its lethal song strong and sharp against the night. Jim saw the deputy slump suddenly forward. His terrified horse plunged ahead.

Heart cold, Jim heard the rifle speak again. Its flame blossomed like a red small flower against the dark backdrop. Another bullet found its mark. The deputy rolled in his saddle and fell limply into the dust. His horse lunged ahead, skidded around a corner, and became lost from sight.

Already Jim Graham's .45s were talking. The hammers fell, the heavy guns bucked back against his thumbs. He had no reason for buying cards in this gun-talk, but inside of him his thoughts were bitter and cold. An ambush had been committed before his very eyes. An ambush deliberately conceived, cold-bloodedly carried out.

But the distance was far for Colt work. He shot six times, building a square around the window. He heard the crash of glass above the snarl of his guns. He knew, then, he had broken the window behind which the ambusher had crouched. But no cries issued by a wounded man came to his ears, and he knew he had missed. The ambusher was making his get-a-way.

Beaver City had come to an instant commotion. Townsmen were moving out of saloons, wondering about the shooting. But Jim did not go out to the fallen deputy. He knew who had brought about the man's death.

Evidently the deputy had known too much about Mitchell and Metrick. Therefore, to protect themselves, they had not let him ride out of Beaver City alive.

Jim saw that this was his chance to pin the deadwood onto either Metrick or Mitchell. He had only to capture the ambusher and he would undoubtedly have one of them dead to rights. That would put one of them out of his way.

He would have to act, and act fast. He ran across the street, his guns out. From the corner of one eye he saw Hans Nelson come out of the Sagebrush Bar. A sudden thought struck him: Mitchell and Metrick had killed the deputy for what he knew, and Hans Nelson knew about them, too.

"Get back, Hans," he hollered.

But the Nordic, if he had heard Jim's warning, paid it no heed. Now Jim lost sight of Nelson as Jim moved forward between two buildings—moved fast, with his guns reloaded and drawn.

AN insistent anger beat against his thoughts. He tried to hold it down, to think clearly, but that task was hard. The cold-bloodedness of the murder he had just witnessed grated like sandpaper against his thoughts. He was bucking men who would stoop to any low depths to obtain their goals.

And, by that same taken, he knew that even he and Hans Nelson were doomed for death by Metrick and Mitchell and, if he and Nelson stayed in Beaver City, either of them might also die under bushwhack guns.

His destination was the back of the hotel. He reasoned that the ambusher, his deed accomplished, would not dare walk openly out on the front sidewalk. He would sneak out the back.

The alley was littered with tincans and trash. Darkness lay like a purple shroud across that narrow strip, but through this darkness he saw the hurrying figure of a man—a man who carried a rifle. The man was running away from him.

Mitchell whirled and shot on the run. The flame of his rifle leaped across space and Jim heard the bullet rip into the wall beside him. Jim's own twin guns were speaking now, rapping out a leaden duet. But the distance was too far for a cutter, and Jim saw Mitchell duck into a side-alley.

Jim hurried forward, reloading his guns. The thought came that perhaps Mitchell would hide in the alley and ambush him. Then this thought was brushed aside. Mitchell was on the run. He was a coward and the cowardice in him was hurrying his steps. Nobody but a coward could carry out an ambush.

He heard a man crashing through the dried grass of a vacant lot. He went that direction, his keen eyes probing the darkness. Now the sound of another man, hurrying also, came from his right. Evidently this third man was also trailing Mitchell.

Jim gave this brief thought. Was the third man Clay Metrick? Had Metrick seen him cross the street toward Mitchell's hideout in the hotel? But then Jim discarded that thought. Metrick wouldn't take a chance that big, he would let Les Mitchell shift for himself. Metrick would play his cards close to his chest.

Suddenly a gun lashed flame ahead. He knew, from the reports, that a rifle was speaking. But the rifle-fire was not directed toward him. It was directed to the third man, the man who was moving into this deadly game of hot lead Mitchell was shooting at the third man.

The third man was answering Mitchell's fire with a sixgun. Jim had no eyes for his fire because his own cutters were running red. The gunroar rolled across the lot. And, high above it, sounded a screech. Jim knew then he had hit Mitchell.

The rifle ceased talking. Jim heard a man crash through the brush. He realized suddenly that the fight had taken them into the willows bordering Beaver creek. He glanced to his right as he ran forward. The stranger's gun had ceased firing. Had Mitchell wounded the man?

Now Jim was in the brush. He added, listening. No sounds came to his ears other than those caused by the men on mainstreet. A grim smile crept across his reckless face. He had downed Mitchell, he knew.

Using less caution, he went to where he had last seen Mitchell. Ahead of him, a desk spot in the night, he saw the shadowy form of a man, crumpled and silent upon the sod. But still Jim held his guns on the man. He had seen too many supposedly dead men roll suddenly over and start firing.

BUT the shadowy form did not move. Jim toed the man over and knelt beside him. Les Mitchell's face, gaunt and silent, met his gaze. He thumbed the man's wrist; Mitchell was dead. He would never ambush another man.

Jim got to his feet. Face bleak. he studied the dead man. A thought

beat against his brain: Mitchell was gone, dead; there was only Clay Metrick left. Then a sudden cry came to his ears.

The sound brought fear into him. Tensely, he listened, and again it came. Somebody was calling his name. Calling it shrilly, his voice laden with pain. Then Jim suddenly remembered the third man—the man who, too, had shot at Les Mitchell. Now that man was calling to him.

His heart beating like a muffled drum, Jim hurried through the brush, heading toward that voice. He halted, peering. The undergrowth was thick and he could see only a few feet ahead.

"Where are you?"

"Here!"

More brush crackled as Jim advanced. As it was, he almost fell over the wounded man. The fellow lay on his side, there beside the boulders. Jim knelt beside him. Hans Nelson's voice held a glad note.

"He got me, Jim, through the shoulder."

"That the only place, Hans?"

"Yes....It was a lucky shot, Jim. Jus' pure blind luck. But it hurts purty bad."

"How come you started after Mitchell, too?"

"Sorta added the thing together, and I figured either Mitchell or Metrick had ambushed that deputy to keep his tongue silent. That gave me the idea that they might try the same thing with me. So I hit out an' here I am. Did you get Mitchell?"

"He's dead," said Jim. "Can you walk?"

"Reckon so. Help me to my feet?"

Jim got an arm around Nelson and raised the man to his feet. Nelson held his grimy hand over the bullethole in his right shoulder and cursed methodically. "Jus' as soon as things start gettin' interestin' I have to go an' walk into a slug. My family never did have much luck...."

"Doc'll patch you up," encouraged Jim.

They left Mitchell where he had fallen. Their progress back into Beaver City was slow. Jim took Hans Nelson to the Deming home. While Mrs. Deming and Birdie bathed the wound, Nelson sat and chewed tobacco. He was joking and smiling but his eyes showed his pain.

"Get me sumptin' to spit in, Birdie. I got a powerful lotta tobaccer to chew. This shoulder's kilin' me."

"I'll get doc," said Jim.

Birdie went to the door with Jim. Some of the excitement had left the town now but still quite a few men moved on the streets. They had carried the deputy into the undertaking parlor behind the drugstore. Jim inquired about him. A man told him the deputy was dead.

"Dead afore he hit the ground," the man said. "Now who do you figure killed him, Graham? An' why would they kill him? Hell, he was a fine fellow, even if he did pack a star. This town's purty mad about his killin'." The man paused and stared down the street.

Jim followed his gaze. Three men were toting a man into town, and Jim smiled. They had heard the shooting when he had killed Les Mitchell. They had investigated and found Mitchell's body.

"Now who kilt Mitchell?" marveled the townsman. "An' why did they kill him?" He shook his homely head. "This thing's sure beyon' me, Graham."

Jim went to Doc Deming's office. The door was locked and he called out his name. The medico unlocked it, his gun in his fist. The voices of the men outside sounded through the frame building.

JIM told the man about how he had killed Mitchell, about Hans Nelson. The medico's eyes were serious. He had completed his analysis of the medicine Mitchell had ordered for old Hank Graham.

"Now Metrick," he said softly, "will have to kill me."

Jim studied him. "Why?"

Doc Deming spoke almost savagely. "I'll tell you why, Jim. You know what those pills have been doing? There's a drug in them—" He mentioned it by name. "—and that drug has been paralyzing old Hank's

throat and optic nerve for these last five years. If Metrick finds out I broke down those pills he'll have to kill me."

"You mean—?"

Doc Deming nodded. "Inside of six months, with proper treatment, your father will see again, and talk. I don't know where Metrick and Mitchell ordered those pills. Possibly, they've had some outside contact —some illegitimate company that furnished them."

Jim's face was frozen. Rage roared inside of him, lashing against him. His first impulse was to walk out, challenge Metrick, and kill him. Gradually he controlled his anger. His voice was a husky whisper.

"But why didn't they just kill him outright?"

"Probably afraid there might be an investigation and they would get caught. This way, they had old Hank out of the way—and that's all they wanted while they stole his ranch blind."

Jim said, "I see...."

Doc Deming started gathering up his equipment. He was, Jim knew, going to his house to attend to Hans Nelson. And, if he got outside, he might get killed. For Jim knew this: Metrick had stood across the street, watching him enter Doc Deming's office. And Metrick, desperate since the death of Mitchell, was all killer now....Jim stood in front of the door.

"Don't leave, Doc," he said.

The medico studied him. "I am a doctor, Jim, and I have a patient waiting."

Jim said, "Please."

Doc Deming pushed him aside. Jim stepped in, and grappled with the man. The medico pulled loose, and Jim grabbed him again. Bodily, he picked up the kicking, threshing doctor, carried him to the chair, and bound him to it with a handy piece of rope. Doc Deming's eyes were sharp.

"What are you going to do, Jim?"

"Kill Clay Metrick."

The doctor said no more. He just sat there and watched Jim as Jim checked his guns. Jim's thin hands worked swiftly. Each gun rode just right on his thighs, each held six bullets. No hammer sitting now on an empty chamber.

The weight had left Jim's shoulders, now. The way ahead was clear. That thought rubbed against him, brought him immense satisfaction. There was gunsmoke ahead and, in that skirling smoke, lay the solution to this trouble.

Strangely, he had no fear, no anxiety. Inside, he felt light, almost happy. Now another thought, an alarming thought, touched him. Birdie would be waiting for him to come through this and if he didn't....But he put that thought away and moved outside and into the night.

"Good luck, Jim," said Doc Deming.

NOW the stars were in the sky. They hung against the blackness like brightly polished diamonds against black velvet. The soft breeze played in the eaves of the buildings. Jim listened to this, finding some strange solace therein. Then he sent his gaze across the street to where Clay Metrick stood.

Metrick stood alone, there beside his bank. He was big, he was broad —and there was strength in him. Jim knew, then, that Metrick had seen him, and that Metrick sensed, rather than knew, there was danger riding this night air.

Jim said, "Metrick!"

His harsh voice rang across the wind. He glimpsed townsmen stopping on the walks, and watching them. But, though, he kept their vision on the edge of his sight, he had only eyes for Clay Metrick.

Now Metrick was moving forward. He said, "You want to see me, Graham?" His voice was low but it carried well.

Jim walked forward. There were then only two sounds: the soft scuff of dust across his boots, the singing of the wind. He went forward twenty paces this way, hard and gray against the lights, and still Metrick waited. But he was more compact now, this man Metrick. He was tense, he was steel.

Time moved and dragged and men watched. They came closer together,

there on that dusty street, and the wind rose a little. They halted then of their own accords, and Jim's voice was a sibilant whisper.

"I killed Les Mitchell, Metrick."

Metrick said, "Why tell me?"

"Mitchell worked with you, Metrick. Doc Deming has analyzed those pills you an' Mitchell was feedin' ol' Hank. You've kept that man through a livin' hell for five long years. Your guns are in leather—now use them!"

Metrick stood there, tense and dark, for a long moment. Jim was watching the man's hands, the heavy hands hooked over gun-handles. He saw the elbows draw back, he saw the guns rise. And the wind became lost in the sodden pound of gunfire.

Now Metrick's guns were out, they were leveling. Only then was Jim aware that his own weapons were scraping leather. Now they were bucking in his fists; they were live, red animals.

Metrick's Colts, too, were talking. Something white-hot speared through Jim's ribs. The blow was crushing, nauseating. Metrick's eyes were hot and bright; and Jim shot five times.

Metrick leaned forward, leaned against the wind. But the wind had no strength, and he fell on his face in the dust.

Jim stood there, face emotionless. Then he turned and hobbled into Doc Deming's office. He sat down, feeling suddenly weak. Deming, he saw, was still tied to the chair.

Deming was hollering; men were surging into the office. Jim must have went out, then, for the next thing he knew, Deming was working on his ribs. And Birdie was standing beside the medico, her dark eyes showing anxiety.

"Hush, girl," said Deming. "He'll be all right, soon."

Jim closed his eyes. He took the thing into his mind: Old Hank would be up soon, Hans Nelson would recover quickly, and that fear would be gone from Birdie's dark eyes. And the weight suddenly left his shoulders.

He had come home, at last.

THE END

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Captain Halsey Gilfeather found that, although peace between North and South had long been signed, the war wasn't over yet!

"DAMN Yankee—" Halsey Gilfeather smiled, a little wearily, as the words came to his ears through the open door of the 'dobe barracks. He had heard those words a lot, with various inflections, in the two weeks since he had arrived at Fort Denning. It was rather a novel experience, for a regular army man, who had fought four years with the Army of the Potomac, and who was still serving in the army of the United States, to be so called, with almost uniform hostility, by his fellow-officers.

But there was, he was willing to grant, a certain amount of reason, if not justification, under the circumstances. It was less than a year since Lee had surrendered, and this, though it was the far west, was also, in many respects, the deep south as well. And his fellow-officers here at Denning, from Major Atlee through Captain Craig and Lieutenants Dowling and McAfee, to say nothing of most of the troopers, had all fought with the Confederacy.

Since the surrender, as Halsey knew, they had all, being soldiers by profession, managed, in one way and another, the officers by taking the oath of allegiance to the union, to get into the regular army, being sent here to keep the Indians in check. Since they were fighting Indians and protecting southern territory at the same time, there was no question of their loyalty, and some higher-up had considered it, evidently, in the light of a good joke.

But it so happened that Halsey Gilfeather was the only officer who was, and had been, a Yankee. And old hatreds, though they might be cloaked in public with a coldly formal politeness, still rankled. The ghostly echo of old guns and former battles still sounded here at Denning.

Halsey prided himself on possessing a good deal of tolerance and understanding for the foibles of his fellow men. So he could understand and grant them some grounds for their feeling. But to be treated as a pariah, as he had been from the first day of his arrival, by everyone, men and women alike—that, he reflected grimly, was going a bit too far, and getting to be rather an old story. And he aimed to know the why and wherefore of it.

It had started, as nearly as he could observe, with Laura Atlee, daughter of the Major. Major Atlee himself, who had served under Stonewall Jackson, had been frigid but polite. So had the others, until he had been introduced to Laura.

For a moment, Halsey Gilfeather had found himself speechless, which was nothing novel to Laura Atlee when men first saw her, but was something unusual to him. She possessed the beauty of the old South, coupled with a flaming spirit which shone through it like a candle in a dark room, and it had literally smitten him dumb. And after that—he smiled wryly at the remembrance. The ice which had come into her eyes and face would freeze any man.

HE QUICKENED his pace now. She was crossing the sun-baked parade ground, and alone—the latter a rare thing, with Captain Craig dancing attendance on her like a monkey on a string. Here was his chance to ask her what had been plaguing him of late. But her glance, as he came up, was not encouraging.

"Good morning, Miss Atlee," Hal-

sey smiled, pretending not to notice her manner. "A lovely day, though it looks as if it will be hot."

"It was, Captain Gilfeather," she conceded, and moved straight ahead.

Halsey flushed, but his jaw set a little more stubbornly, the heavy shoulder muscles seemed to stretch the blue of his uniform.

"I was mistaken, it seems a north wind is blowing," he said. "Miss Atlee, you seem to think that I'm poison—and I'd like to know why. I'd even like to be friends, if possible. I know that I'm a Yank—but after all, your father has taken the oath of allegiance and is a United States army officer, and the war, God be praised, is over—"

"Not with me, Captain Gilfeather—not with me!"

"But why not?" he demanded, genuinely puzzled. "If your father can let bygones be bygones, and someone in the war office is big enough to do the same, surely you can do as much?"

For the first time, she turned and faced him directly, and there was no more ice in her gaze. Rather, a scorn which burned and seared like the Arizona sun itself.

"Since you've asked, Captain Gilfeather, I'll tell you," she flashed. "I don't like Yankees—I never have. But I can tolerate most of them, since I have to. But not the man who murdered my brother!"

"The man who murdered your brother?" Halsey repeated, a little stupidly. "I—you mean me? I'm afraid I don't understand."

"I'll be clear, sir. Two years ago, my brother, who was a Lieutenant under Lee, was captured by your army. And—and executed by a firing squad—at your orders. The orders of a Captain Halsey Gilfeather! Do you wonder that I—I hate you?"

Halsey regarded her in increasing amazement and some measure of understanding.

"I begin to see," he agreed gravely. "And, if you think that, I can't blame you for the way you feel. But I still can't understand it. I remember no Lieutenant Atlee, and I certainly wouldn't forget, under any such circumstances."

"He was my half-brother—murdered!" Her voice was half a sob. "Lieutenant John Carlin. And he was not a spy, suh!"

She turned and almost ran from him then. Halsey stood, staring after her, half-minded to pursue, then he stroked his chin and turned as an orderly hurried up.

"The Major's compliments, sir, and will you be so good as to attend him at once, in his quarters."

Halsey nodded, still absently. He remembered John Carlin. In fact, it was the haunting memory of John Carlin, in part, which had driven him to seek service in this far Western outpost of the army, where fighting still went on, though against a different foe.

And she had declared that he had not been a spy! What a tangled business war could make of life, for a fact. As he approached headquarters, he saw Laura Atlee, a little way off, just parting from Captain Craig, and from the meaningful glance which Craig bent on him, he guessed that Craig had been asking her why she was so close to tears.

There was little doubt but what Craig and every other officer at the fort knew the story of John Carlin, and his own part in it. No wonder that they regarded him as a Yank set apart from the common herd.

Craig nodded coldly as they passed through the door, almost together. Lieutenant Dowling was there already, and Major Atlee motioned them to chairs, his face a little troubled.

"Gentlemen," he said without preamble. "Jim Hudkins, the scout, has brought in word that the Indians are apparently getting ready for something new—and that usually means deviltry. I want the three of you to take twenty men, and Hudkins, and go and have a look around. Captain Gilfeather will go along, chiefly to get a bit of experience in this sort of warfare, which is considerably different, Captain, from what you have been accustomed to. Because of your experience, Captain Craig, you will

be in charge. Look the situation over, and use your own judgment—but remember that this is primarily a scouting expedition, so don't take any unnecessary risks or waste the lives of a single man, if it can be avoided. We have a big job to do, and too few men to do it with, as it is."

TEN minutes later, they were in the saddle and jogging off toward the mountains. Captain Craig talked with Lieutenant Dowling, but he ignored Halsey completely. The man knew his business, Halsey was willing to grant, and, though he seemed to have a clear enough monopoly on her favor, he seemed to regard Halsey in the light of a rival, where Laura Atlee was concerned, and to hate him accordingly.

"Given an even chance, and I might be, at that," Halsey reflected. "But if anybody had told me, a year ago, that I'd be taking not only orders, but this sort of thing, from Lee's men—" he shrugged. After all, it didn't matter. War, of whatever sort, he had long since discovered, was a bigger business than the personalities involved.

Three hours later, at a sign from the scout, they pulled up, back in the hill country. The sun was hot overhead, the air dry and parched. Sweat poured from every man and beast. Jim Hudkins, long, lean and hungry, had no expression on his own face.

"There's some of them right close," he reported. "And they've seen us, of course. The thing that I can't figure is, the way they're actin'—it ain't their usual way. There come some of them now!" he ended, and pointed.

A quarter of a mile away, something more than a score of warriors, mounted on wiry little cayuses, had ridden into sight, openly, were jogging unhurriedly toward them. Even to Halsey, it was apparent that this was unusual behavior. The Indians' attitude was not hostile, yet there was open war between them and the whites.

Craig studied them, puzzled, a little ill at ease.

"Be set for trouble, if they try to charge us," he warned. "I'm damned if I understand what they're about."

"Looks to me like they want to parley," Halsey suggested.

"It's something new for these heathen if they do, and probably a trick," Craig muttered. "But maybe you're right," he added, a little grudgingly, as the main party stopped, and two of their number continued to ride steadily forward.

"Chief Long Feather is one of 'em," the scout volunteered.

When a hundred yards away, the two pulled to a stop, palms upheld. After a momentary hesitation, Craig made his decision.

"Lieutenant, you speak their lingo," he said. "You and Gilfeather go and meet them. We'll stay here and keep them covered."

"They must want something," Dowling confided as they trotted their horses forward. "Long Feather is a pretty sensible sort of hombre, I guess, and it's likely his idea. How!" he greeted.

"How!" Long Feather returned. He continued, in fairly good English, without preamble, realizing as well as anyone that they were being regarded with suspicion.

"You have three chiefs, prisoners, back in fort. Good men. We like them back, free. We have white man, big chief, too. We plan kill him, this afternoon. You set them free, we free him. If not, he die."

He finished, gravely, and waited. Dowling stared.

"This is a bit different," he whistled. "Personally, I'd be in favor of talking it over, for maybe we could settle other differences peacefully. But we'll have to talk it over with Captain Craig, Chief. Back there." He indicated Craig, and the chief nodded.

"You talk. We wait, little while."

Craig listened incredulously as they reported.

"A white man?" he said. "Well, and what of it? Do they think we're such simpletons as to turn loose three of their men for one in return? That would be a nice deal."

"Why not?" Halsey asked, a little maliciously. "I heard you say, the other day, that one white man was worth ten Indians, so we'd be getting the best of the deal."

Craig ignored him, in silent contempt.

"I knew all along that it was a trick," he said. "We'll be getting back to the fort and report to the Major, since we've a pretty good idea of their numbers and disposition now, and know that they're planning mischief."

DOWLING looked a little undecided, but Halsey was amazed.

"Surely you'll talk it over with them some more, at least, and find out what you can," he suggested. "After all, to leave a white man to be killed and tortured, without trying to help him—"

"I doubt if they've got a white man alive, and if they have, he's probably just some fool prospector or trapper. Even if they have, what could we do? They match us, man for man, and you know the Major's orders. We're starting back, now."

Halsey shrugged.

"As you like," he agreed. "You're in command of these men, but I'm merely an onlooker. So I'm going to have a try at helping that poor devil."

"What do you think you could do, alone?" Craig did not attempt to hide his scorn. "You don't know this country, or this sort of fighting."

The two Indians, who had waited patiently, had evidently given up hope of any success from the parley. They had turned, were riding back to rejoin their companions, and the whole party headed back out of sight. Craig shrugged.

"It's your neck," he added to Halsey. "If you want to be a fool, I can't help it."

Dowling spoke up.

"I'm going with Captain Gilfeather," he announced shortly.

Craig bent a withering glance on him.

"Is the sun affecting a lot of heads?" he asked. "Well, I may have an unpleasant time explaining to the Major, still I'd rather be in my boots than yours."

"I'd like to go along," the scout said gruffly.

"You will," Craig nodded grimly. "With the rest of us, back to the fort. Let's get moving."

Dowling looked at Halsey as the others rode away, the scout scowling, the men glumly following according to orders, but plainly disgusted.

"That sticks in my craw," he confessed. "A white man—they have a pretty way of disposing of prisoners—and he wouldn't even ask any more questions, when we had a chance to get him back alive, and maybe pave the way for peace. Now we'll have plenty more hell before this mess is cleaned up, for Long Feather has plenty of warriors, and hunting them down in this country—" he shrugged.

"Maybe we won't have to worry about that." Halsey grinned. "But we can have a look around."

"I have a pretty good idea as to where we'll find them," Dowling added, and nodded in the direction in which the Indians had disappeared. "I've done a good bit of scouting in this territory. Off there a few miles is a big hidden canyon, and I think they must have headquarters in a big cavern up the side of a cliff. Of course, nobody's quite sure of that—and I've always been hampered by Craig, who stops short of finding out. And now they'll likely think that everybody has gone back to the fort."

"That's what I'm counting on," Halsey agreed. "You lead the way."

They rode for the next couple of hours, taking advantage of every bit of cover which the hills and coulees afforded, working steadily back into rougher country. Having left their horses and climbed on foot, they came finally to a point where, all at once, the vast canyon of which Dowling had spoken opened out ahead and below them—a massive canyon, with sheer ledges on either side, riding to tremendous heights, and varying from a hundred feet to half a mile in width.

During that time, they had seen no Indians, though unseen eyes might be watching them. But Halsey had a

hunch, which he knew was shared by Dowling, that the Indians' interest was now centered on what they aimed to do to their unfortunate captive. They had wanted to save their captive chiefs by a trade. Since that had failed, they would take vengeance for them on the white man.

Dowling had focussed his field-glasses. Now he pointed and handed them to Halsey.

"Off there, about a mile, down and across the valley. What do you think?"

HALSEY looked and caught his breath. The great cliff off there was shadowed, but with the glasses he could see what had not been manifest before—a winding, narrow path climbing the sheer face of the cliff, up from the bottom of the canyon, to a blacker spot which was obviously the mouth of the cavern they had been seeking. Men moved there like shadows, and, down below, where the canyon widened to a meadow, preparations were being made, of a nature not to be misunderstood.

"That's it, all right," Halsey agreed. "Maybe we should report back right away, Dowling. That's invaluable information. But I don't see any sign of their captive. He must still be in the cave."

"Likely," agreed Dowling. "They don't like to start the festivities too soon, because they'll want them to last well into the night, with a big pow-wow and war dance. Do you have any ideas?"

"That's a stake they're setting up, isn't it?"

"Yes. I watched a man fry at the stake, once. I was tied and didn't have much choice, and my turn was scheduled to come next, but by luck, some help got there first. It can be dragged out a long time by those who know their business."

"I've no doubt. It looks to me as if a man might get down from above, to within say, twenty feet of that cave mouth. How long they'll wait to bring him out is the question—"

"There is the bunch who came to parley with us, way down the canyon, just coming back. It'll take them an hour, and nothing will begin till after they've reported. The rest of them are making preparations, just in case."

"I believe you're right. It's a chance, anyway. I'm going to take my horse, circle down the other way and try to get across. Then, if I'm lucky, maybe I can get above there by the time they bring him out."

"It's a chance, of course, if we hurry. Though I don't quite see what good that will do."

"I've an idea—maybe it won't work, but it's worth a try. I want you to stay on this side, only circle down till you're right opposite the cave. When you see me above it, at what you'll know is the right time, maybe you can distract them a little with a few rifle shots. I'll leave my rifle with you, since I'll be busy without it. In any case, from over here, you should be able to get away and beat them back to the fort, and tell what you know—if things don't go right."

"Just as you say," Dowling agreed, and hesitated. Then he held out his hand. "Here's luck, sir," he said gruffly.

"Thanks," Halsey agreed. "I'll need it."

It was, he knew, a long chance, but it was the only possibility that he could see. And with that stake waiting, he had to try something.

He was counting strongly on two factors—the first, that all the Indians in this vicinity, confident that there were no enemies hereabouts, would be gathered in the one place, either the big cavern or the canyon floor below, and so keeping no good watch, to hamper his own movements. The second, was that the prisoner would not be brought out from the cavern until he had time to reach the spot he was aiming for. A lot of luck was involved in both premises, but he couldn't alter that.

The first part of his journey was easier than he had counted on, finding a way to cross the canyon and on beyond. But, presently, after he had left his horse and was on foot again, it was tough going. Once he reached the point where he could begin the

descent of the cliff, he saw that it wouldn't be so bad, however. There was no one on guard up here.

He had no way of getting a good view down below, or of knowing how things were going until he finally reached the point he had seen from the opposite side of the canyon. From there it was impossible to descend any farther, unless he chose to use the lariat rope he had brought along, and lower himself to the path at the side of the cave. And he had no desire to do that.

But, up here, none of them had seen him or suspected his presence. Opposite him, some three hundred yards away as the crow would have to fly it, Lieutenant Dowling saw him, watched with increasing excitement. Gilfeather had made it, which proved that he was considerably more a man and a soldier than some of them had given him credit for. Though how he proposed to go about rescuing one man from a horde of two or three hundred savages, was more than Dowling could figure.

YET the fact that he had reached the point he sought, and in time, was a big thing. And now, those who had toiled up the long pathway and vanished in that black pocket, were starting to reappear. Dowling counted them, one, two, three, ten, fifteen—descending again, unconscious of the crouching figure just above them. Then, through the glasses, Dowling saw him come out—a white man, walking with hands tied behind his back. Dowling laid down the glasses and raised his rifle.

The captive looked to have been badly used since his captivity. Head bent, he shuffled, staggering a little, men in front of him and behind. For an instant he paused, as though half-blinded by the light, looking off at the vast chasm spread below.

It was at that moment, as he paused, that the loop of the lariat settled down about his shoulders and jerked tight. The next instant, before any of the Indians could see what was happening, Halsey Gilfeather had straightened, was pulling the captive up to him, hand over hand, as easily as if he had been a child.

Certainly Captain Halsey Gilfeather knew how to use a rope, and he had taken the Indians completely by surprise. But they were quick to recover. Someone yelled, bows and arrows were brought into play. A tomahawk spun upward, shattering on the cliff inches from Halsey's head. Dowling squeezed the trigger, saw the foremost warrior directly below, who had been raising a gun, fling up his arms, poise a moment, and pitch far out to the depths below.

"That place will be the devil of a one to storm, even knowing where it is," Dowling reflected, and snatched up Halsey's rifle.

Two shots in succession were enough to throw the Indians into confusion, since they had no notion how strong an attack might be coming. It was long enough for Halsey to have the white man in his arms and to dodge back out of sight, starting up the pathway above.

It looked to Dowling as though the captive was in no shape to climb by himself, and he wouldn't be easy for any man, even such a one as Halsey Gilfeather, to lug up that precipice. But if he could keep them down by the cave, until Halsey could get to the top—

At least, reloading as fast as possible, he was making every bullet count. One savage, boosted on the shoulder of a comrade, managed to

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reach the path where Halsey had crouched, but before he could move farther, Dowling sent him spinning for the depths.

"Gilfeather's still going," he breathed. "Now he's out of their sight for good—unless they have some other way of cutting him off, except by circling. Hope he makes it. Guess I'd better be moving, too. Nothing more I can do here, and the blighters are beginning to take too much interest in me."

Twenty minutes later, sitting his horse and watching, he almost set up a whoop as he saw Halsey coming—riding an Indian pony like a veteran, driving at least a score of cayuses ahead of him, as well as his own horse, with the captive tied fast but reeling in the saddle. Dowling spurred hastily to help in the drive.

"Found these ponies, where they'd left them hobbled, and no guard," Halsey yelled at him, grinning. "They aimed to get to them and catch me—maybe a dozen of the buggers appeared, but they were too late for a ride."

"How's he?" Dowling jerked his head toward the unconscious man.

Halsey's smile faded.

"In bad shape," he confessed. "He's been wounded a spell back, and he simply went out on me. I judge he kept walking just on sheer nerve, before, to show them that he could do it. But with decent care, he'd ought to make it."

Presently, Halsey took the unconscious man up in front of his own saddle. He was still carrying him as the sun set and they approached the fort to the sound of the evening gun.

Captain Craig and a handful of others met them. Craig glanced at the unconscious man and shook his head.

"Looks like you did it," he confessed grudgingly. "Though such a risk, for just anybody, and in his shape, wasn't worth it—"

Ignoring him, Halsey had lifted his burden down, and now, sighing, the man's eyes opened again. Not far off, curious at first, Laura Atlee had been watching. Now, with a little gasping, choking cry, she was beside him.

"John!" she exclaimed. "It is—oh, John!"

A QUARTER of an hour later, with John Carlin in a hospital bed, she came to Halsey again, as he finished washing some of the grime of the desert from his face and hands. Her eyes were softly luminous with a new emotion now.

"Captain Gilfeather," she said. "I can never thank you enough—but what I can't understand—I was told that John was taken, and—and shot as a spy, by your orders—I can't understand—"

Halsey smiled a little.

"That was something which couldn't be explained—then," he said. "There's no harm in it now, however. Though supposedly a Lieutenant under Lee, John Carlin was really a captain in the army of the Potomac, in the secret service. To protect him in his position as a Confederate, when he was captured that time, it was necessary for him to be—officially—shot as a spy. And to remain dead as John Carlin until the end of the war. Then, with the moving tides of war, and because of that, he was sent out this way, and did a more complete vanishing act than ever. I volunteered for service out in this country, hoping to find some trace of what had happened to him."

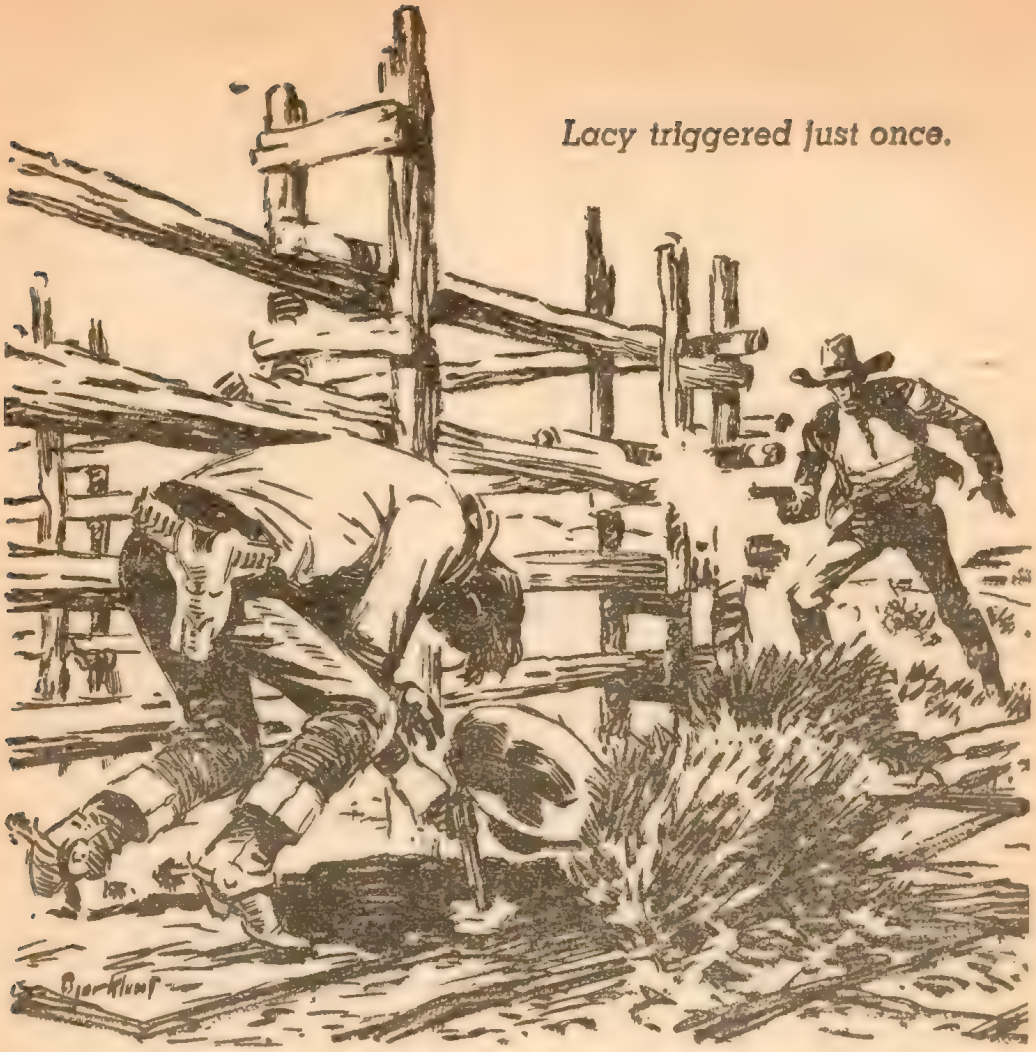
She was staring at him, still half unbelieving. Halsey's face was suddenly half-serious, half-smiling.

"I suppose it's quite a shock to you, that your own brother was a Yank. But since he was, I hope you won't think too harshly of me because I happen to be one, too—"

Laura Atlee was smiling—and her smile, Halsey noted approvingly, was as warm as her eyes could be cold toward an enemy.

"I think, Captain Gilfeather, that I'm coming to—almost love the Yankees," she said softly.

THE END



Lacy triggered just once.

LACY RUNS A ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ FENCE BRAND

By Wilbur S. Peacock

(author of "Lawmen's Burden," "Guns for a Halfpint," etc.)

"Clemont's an outright sadist and you made yourself a bad enemy when you pushed his face in for beating his horse, Lacy. The polecat's in solid with Fenton, the guy who has the mortgage on your ranch—better walk careful, cowboy!"

LACY KEEVER sloped into Twin Springs just as the lowering sun was painting the horizon with a shifting band of crimson, yellow, and violet. His sorrel loped easily, carrying Lacy's big-boned body with deceptive strength. Tiny motes of dust floated in the still air to mark their passing as they

came to the stable at the edge of town.

Lacy whistled softly to himself as he slid from the saddle and hitched his mount to the scarred rack just outside the door. He tied the reins with a tug-knot. The world for the moment seemed extraordinarily bright and cheerful. He turned eagerly toward the main part of town, a cheerful grin softening the square harshness of his features. Then he stopped, his eyes narrowing at the sudden commotion in the stable.

There was the frightened squeal of a fear-mad horse, then the savage cursing of a man. Lacy winced inwardly as the vicious sounds of a broadstrap striking flesh slit the air with reports like muffled gunshots.

Vaulting the hitch-rack, he raced the few yards to the door, halted momentarily on the threshold. Then he hurled himself into the semi-gloom, ducked the flashing forefeet of a rearing horse, and caught the upraised strap with a bronzed hand and tossed it to one side. His darting fingers clutched the shoulder of the horse-beater, whirled him around, and held him momentarily rigid.

"Let's see if you can take it, mister!" he snapped thinly.

He swung with the entire weight of his body behind the blow. There was a meaty smack as his fist connected with the other's chin, then the man was a limp heap against a stall wall, a thin trickle of blood trailing from his nose from the force of the blow.

Lacy Keever sucked at a skinned knuckle, his white-hot rage cooling as quickly as it had flamed, but he wasted no time on the fallen man. Instead, he walked slowly to the trembling horse, touched him with a gentle hand. Gradually the blowing of the horse ceased; it quieted beneath the gentle rubbing of its neck. It winced, its muscles writhing, as Lacy's deft fingers probed for the welts left by the strap. Then its feet stopped their nervous shifting; it stood quietly, a black shadow in the near-darkness.

The fallen rannie stirred, pulled himself dazedly into a sitting position. His head moved groggily on a limp neck as he tried to focus blurred eyes.

"What happened?" he uttered bewilderedly. "Who hit me?"

Lacy Keever leaned negligently against a post, his body braced loosely, his thumb tucked into the belt near the worn handle of his gun. He spat silently, spoke through thin lips, his eyes like flat and shiny bits of grey agate.

"I did," he said, "any arguments?"

"No argument," the seated man said dully, touched at his jaw with a gingerly hand.

Lacy moved back toward the doorway, alert to the slightest motion of the other toward a gun. He paused at the door, his tall body bulky in the fading light.

"Beat that horse again," he warned, "and I'll thrash you to death with the same strap." There was a cold finality in the ring of his voice.

LACY didn't wait for an answer; he moved warily out of the doorway, his body alert to the faintest sound behind him. Satisfied that all was well, he turned again toward town.

He walked easily, his scarred boots patting up little boils of fine dust. The sun had almost disappeared beyond the mountains; now the faint flickerings of lamps gleamed ahead.

The lobby of the commercial house was deserted; he turned from it, entered the small restaurant of the Chinese, Wing Loo. The Chinese grinned at him, his fat, olive face dissolving into a thousand wrinkles.

"One steak?" he said.

Lacy dropped wearily into a battered chair, tossed his stetson on the floor. He grinned at the aged oriental, deriving a sardonic amusement from the repetition of the words that always greeted his appearance.

"One steak," he agreed, "and plenty of potatoes."

"Can do." Wing Loo disappeared into the back from which presently came the rich odors of broiling meat.

Lacy Keever rolled a quirly with steady fingers and smoked it slowly,

relishing the fragrance of the smoke. He felt the strain of the past weeks easing from his body as he slumped deeper in his chair.

He didn't look up when the door opened behind him, coming to attention only when the new arrival dropped into a vacant chair at the other side of the table. Then he smiled, sun wrinkles fine-tracking the corners of his wide eyes.

"Hello, Barker," he said slowly.

Lieutenant Stephen Barker leaned over the table, dropped a flat pad of bills on its oil-cloth surface. Lacy picked up the pad, riffled it through his fingers.

"So the horses were alright?" he asked.

Lieutenant Barker grinned. "They were fine, Keever," he said, "they're a bargain at twenty-five."

"I know horses."

Wing Loo padded softly in from the kitchen, laid the platter upon the table.

"One steak," he said proudly.

"Don't forget the coffee, you butter-colored heathen," Lacy said, grinning.

"Not forget." Wing Loo moved again toward the tiny kitchen.

Lacy tucked the money into his shirt pocket, began carving the steak. He ate with the application of a hungry man, oblivious of the other. Barker packed a pipe, sat sucking it unlit. At last, his voice, casual, he spoke.

"Clemont came into the Gay Lady just before I came over here. His face was pushed all out of shape. Said he walked into the stable door!"

Lacy waited until the Chinese had brought his coffee. He drank deeply, set the cup down.

"It's possible," he said noncommittally. Color sprang up from his collar, pushing his bronze coloring even darker, as he noticed the soldier's gaze rivetted on the skinned knuckles of his right hand.

"Clemont," Barker said reflectively, "is a sadist; he's cut some of his mounts to ribbons with the whip he carries. And that barbed wire fence of his shows how nasty cruel he can be. Those barbs have crippled plenty of stock."

"I know," Lacy said thinly; "the wire runs between his spread and mine."

Lieutenant Barker touched a match to his pipe. "I need two hundred more horses. When can you deliver?"

"Ten days at the outside." Lacy pushed back his platter, rolled and lit a quirly. "Most of them are in Hell's Half Acre; it'll take time to drive them in. Say about September first."

"That's fine!" Barker pushed back his chair, stood up. "Two hundred at twenty five is five thousand. I'll have the money the first." He paused irresolutely. "Be careful, Lacy," he said slowly, "Clemont and Fenton are pretty thick. Mary would be hard up if you—"

"I understand—and thanks!" Lacy cut in. He watched the other leave the room, a warm glow within him at the soldier's friendly concern.

HE flipped a coin onto the table. left the restaurant. His hand reached up and caressed the packet of bills in his pocket as he crossed the street to the Gay Lady Saloon. His step was heavy on the board walk, as he moved down the sagging planks to the swinging doors.

A dozen men were in the room; they looked up casually as he pushed through the doors, stood momentarily on the threshold. Then their eyes swung away, suddenly veiled and uninterested. Lacy walked across the dusty planks, toward a deal table at the rear.

There were three men at the table, three men apparently enjoying a game of stud. Clemont was there, a livid bruise racing across the angle of his jaw and chin, his stubbled cheek slightly swollen, a sullen antagonism in his dull eyes. Starks, his foreman, sat hunched at his side, the narrow scar a thin line of white on his brown face. And Lester Fenton sat opposite them, his slender fingers riffling and dealing with a calm sureness.

Lacy Keever seated himself without invitation, laid the money on the

table. His voice was casual, but the hate within him made him catch his breath with a slow gasp.

"There's two thousand of the money I owe you, Fenton"; he said, "I guess I'll pay it on my note now. I'll pay you the rest on the first, when I let the rest of my stock go."

Fenton lifted his hole card, peeked at it deliberately, his eyes speculative behind the shifting smoke of his tailor-made.

"Your money's no good," he said shortly, "Your mortgage reads that all money must be paid at once."

Tiny muscles writhed in Lacy's set jaws, his knuckles were suddenly white.

"So that's the way it is?" he said.

Fenton nodded briefly. "That's the way it is! All or none."

Lacy stood up, tucked the bills back into his pocket. His voice was quiet, only a bitter undertone accenting it a bit.

"I'll have it all for you in ten days!"

Fenton smiled with his mouth. "I'll wait," he said, "I've waited a long time for those springs of yours."

"You'll never get them." Lacy's shoulders grew increasingly taut. "You've foreclosed on a lot of little spreads around here, squeezing them out when rustlers peeled them at just the right time. You thought you had me when you bought up my mortgage; but you didn't figure that the army would need new stock so soon."

"Maybe not," Fenton tossed a chip onto the table. "I open for five."

Lacy spun on one heel, anger making his steps light on the floor. He stood for a moment in the cool, night air, forcing calmness to return. He walked heavily toward the stable, his fingers absent-mindedly rolling a quirly. He hung it slackly in his lips, lit it as he approached the stable hitch-rack.

He swung lithely into the saddle of his blaze-face sorrel, first twitching loose the reins. Then he kneed the horse, swung at a trot toward his spread.

He rode steadily for an hour, his mount moving at a ground-eating lope down the dim road. He dozed in the saddle, riding with the ease of long practice, swaying with every movement of his horse. He roused with the flat echo of the rifle shot, heard the whip of the lead cutting air.

For a moment Lacy's sleep-dulled mind did not grasp the import of the shot. He had only a confused impression of his surroundings. Then he recognized the narrow valley that gave onto his spread. He crouched lower in the saddle as another shot sped closely by.

HIS hand stabbed at the heavy gun on his hip, as he twisted around in the saddle. His shots made sharp, biting echoes in the night. Strangely there were no more shots from the rear; instead, came the pound of hooves on the rocky road.

Lacy gave his horse his head, lifting the sorrel into a run with quick slashes of his rowels. He had no choice in the matter; a gun fight would gain him nothing, would probably lose him the two thousand dollars he carried.

The sorrel flowed into swift motion, speeding through the night with the surefootedness of a huge cat. Lacy holstered his gun, then concentrated on his escape. His lips parted in a faint grin as he lost the sounds of pursuit.

He didn't see the stretched lariat until it was too late. The sorrel caught the rope just above its knees, went hurtling forward into a side-plunging fall....Its shrill whinny of alarm slit the air like a whistle.

Lacy grabbed leather, trying to keep his seat. Then his clutch pulled free, and he was whirling through the air. He curled in upon himself, striving to roll with his forward fall. He had only a second for thought, then he struck the ground, gasped in agony as he rolled over and over on the hard ground. Suddenly there was silence, except for the dim sounds of the pursuit. He pushed himself up on shaky arms, then collapsed in a crumpled heap. Dimly he heard a crashing in the bushes, then

everything went black with a suddenness that gave him no more time to think.

Swiftly, silently except for muttered cursing, two men worked over his slack body. After a bit, they left, leaving Lacy still unconscious.

Lacy Keever came to with a sudden rush of consciousness. His hand fumbled for his gun even before he was fully aroused. His fingers found only empty holster; somehow in the jarring fall, his gun had been flipped from the leather.

He rolled to a sitting position, felt acute nausea surge within him at a burning agony in his body. He swore softly, stretched to see if any bones were broken. He became aware for the first time that his heavy shirt had been stripped from his shoulders. His back seemed to be on fire; he probed with numbed fingers as far around as he could reach.

Then blind rage sent him to his feet, as his fingers found the weals and welts that the strap had criss-crossed upon his back. He had been beaten while he was unconscious. beaten with a sadistic savagery that had left his back a bruised and bloody welter of paining muscles.

He walked a dozen steps before giddiness made him lean against a small tree. His breath was hot in his tightened throat, his blood pounding heavily at his temples. He leaned there for minutes, the dull bitterness of defeat flooding him with a savage anger.

It would be futile, he knew, to try to recover his money, and avenge himself for the flogging he had received. Clement and his foreman would have alibis that would offer no loopholes for his charges. No, there was nothing he could do but abide his time. And time was a big factor in his plans; he had but ten days to raise the mortgage money—and two thousand dollars of that was already gone, almost a third of his debt.

He eased his shirt onto his stiffened back, found his gun ten yards up the road. He located the sorrel further down the road, nursing a skinned foreleg, limping slightly as it moved toward him at his whistle.

Lacy walked the last mile to the ranch-house, not wanting to injure the blaze-face further. He unsaddled, gave the horse a quick rubdown, doused liniment on its cut legs.

Finished, he strode to the bunkhouse wash-stand, stripped off his shirt. He winced as he cleansed the proud and angry wounds on his back. Then he plodded back to the ranch-house, feeling suddenly aged. He eased open the door, stepped quietly over the threshold.

He could hear his wife's deep breathing in the bedroom, as he found a clean shirt, slid his arms into the sleeves. The ache was leaving his back, but the muscles were beginning to stiffen. For the first time in his life he felt the insane urge to kill, as the pain throbbed in dulling waves through his shoulders.

He tiptoed into the bedroom, stood gazing at his wife. Mary lay quietly, her fair hair atousle around her soft cheeks, the light comforter showing the swelling outline of her body. Lacy leaned over, brushed her forehead lightly with his lips. He was as near to crying then as he had ever been in his life.

Then he backed silently out of the room, blew out the lamp his wife had left alight, settled down on the long couch. He smoked interminably for minutes, finaliy drifted into sleep.

"WE CAN'T do it, Lacy." Matt Brinker, Lacy's foreman, crossed a long leg over the saddle horn. "This is the thirty-first, and we've rounded up less than two hundred head of horses. The rest of them must be back in Hell's Half Acre, holed up in some of those box-canyons. It'll take another week to smoke them out."

Lacy Keever watched the milling herd of stock in the swing corral at the valley's bottom. Dust lay thick on him and his sorrel, put there by days of hard riding. His lips made a thin line in the squareness of his face, his knuckles were white on the saddle horn.

"We haven't got a week, Matt," he said stiffly, "we've got one day. Hell

I had to talk like the devil to contract for an extra hundred head. We've either got to produce, or pack up, while Fenton takes over!"

Matt Brinker flicked his cigarette to one side, his voice suddenly flat and vicious.

"He'll never take this over," he said, "he squeezed me and the missus out of our spread last year. I won't crowd back much farther."

Lacy said nothing, watched a waddie come loping toward him. The man rode around the corral, plunged up the slope, came to a sliding halt.

"I just shot three head," he announced grimly, "One was blind and the other two crippled from the fence."

"Alright, both of you get back to work." Lacy kicked his mount into a run, sped back the way the waddie had come.

He found the horses fifteen minutes down the trail, all with a bullet hole through their heads. He swore bitterly as he saw the gashes torn by the merciless barbs of Clemont's fence. Loosening the thongs of his saddle bag, he lifted out a pair of wire clippers.

For two hours he rode the fence, clipping the wire every fifty feet. There was nothing revengeful in the action; he was merely taking precautions that no more of the horses were crippled. He had lost nine head of them because the four-pronged, inch-long barbs had crippled the horses until they had to be destroyed.

Finished, he rested for a while in the shade of a cottonwood. He lit a quirly, his forehead furrowing, as he tried to get the entire situation clear in his mind.

There was but one thing left to do; he had to ask Fenton for more time. He knew that the gambler would refuse, but he had no alternative. He climbed back into the saddle, headed for town.

The past nine days had been work and worry filled. The round-up had not produced as many head of stock as the spring tally had shown there should be. Lieutenant Barker had been hard to sell in regard to the hundred extra head that Lacy had had to sell to realize enough to pay off his note.

And Mary knew nothing of the desperate state of affairs. The doctor had warned him about exciting her in her condition, making him understand that he might lose her and the baby too. Even now, she was in town, at the preacher's home, expecting the baby within a day.

LACY rode into town, knowing that he was about licked, knowing that ten years of work was about finished. But there was no self pity in him, only the granite hardness that had brought him so far.

He hitched the sorrel outside of Wing Loo's, walked quickly over to the Gay Lady. He paused briefly just inside the door, adjusting his eyes to the dimness. Except for the bartender, Fenton was alone.

"I'd like a ten day extension on my note?" Lacy said bluntly, when the gambler looked up from a game of solitaire. "Some of my stock is in the badlands; it'll take a few days to round them up."

Fenton smiled, his eyes hard. "Nothing doing, Keever," he said shortly, "I'm not giving charity, I'm a business man. Your note is dated as payable the first of September, and there isn't any way of changing it."

Lacy leaned over the table. "But look, Fenton," he said, his voice suddenly strained and desperate, "that'll mean I'll be wiped out!"

Fenton slapped the cards down on the table, braced his hands on the edge. "I know it," he said, "and I don't give a damn. Those springs of yours are worth a fortune in this country, and I'm going to have them. If you pay by tomorrow, the land's yours; if not, well—" His shoulders shrugged eloquently.

"Alright!" Lacy spun from the table, pounded unseeingly out into the street. He stopped as he caught sight of Cal Brepp, the town doctor.

"How is she, Doc?" he asked anxiously.

Cal nodded cheerfully. "She's all right," he said, "but you better come in to town about noon tomorrow. That'll be about the time."

"Sure, Doc, sure." Lacy turned toward Wing Loo's restaurant, as the doctor climbed into his rig and drove swiftly down the street.

"Coffee, Wing," Lacy seated himself at a front table. "And plenty black."

"Can do." Wing Loo's face was impassive as he vanished in the kitchen, reappearing almost instantly with a steaming mug. He watched as Lacy drank quickly of the liquid.

"Funny!" he remarked casually.

"Yeah, what's so funny?" Lacy glared at the oriental.

Wing Loo polished a table top, his head averted. "Mist' Clemont raise possies?" he asked.

"Sure, so what?" Lacy finished his coffee.

"Laugh like hell when he tell his fo'eman he got hundled head of holses in Hell's Kitchen."

"He did, eh!" Lacy fumbled for his tobacco sack, then stiffened as the import of the words sank in. He caught at the sleeve of the Chinese. "What did you say?" he snapped.

Wing Loo repeated himself, a faint spark of light in his dark eyes. Then he was alone in his restaurant, grinning gently to himself as he heard the vanishing hoofbeats of Lacy's sorrel.

"Dam' fool!" he said approvingly to the empty room.

LACY KEEVER edged cautiously toward the cliff edge overhanging Hell's Kitchen. The air was damp and steamy from the steam geysers that spurted from the arroyo's floor. He dropped his hat to one side, peered over the edge.

He almost shouted in his exultation, when he saw the herd of horses penned below. He knew his calculations had been right. Wing Loo's words had provided the tip-off. Tracing back over the past months, he had remembered that always, just before Fenton had squeezed somebody out of a homestead, stock had disappeared mysteriously for a short while. Just long enough that the homesteaders could not raise enough money to save themselves. And then the stock had been found, after a foreclosure, running loose in the badlands that bordered most of the ranches.

Lacy grinned to himself. He had been right; Clemont and Fenton were working together to get his ranch. After tomorrow, the horses would have been turned back into the badlands, where they would be found after it would be too late to realize the cash for them. By then, Fenton would own the ranch.

Lacy's eyes narrowed at the sight of the two men lying in the shade of a huge rock. His eyes swivelled back and forth, trying to find the quickest and safest way to the bottom of the Kitchen. He had to work fast if he were to get the drop on the both of them.

His hate flared white-hot when he recognized Clemont and Starks. His shoulders were still scarred from the beating they had given him nine days before. Now, the Gods willing, he would repay them for some of the torture he had undergone.

He slipped back from the edge of the hole, clambered swiftly around, until he was just above a grasslined slope. He crouched there, his gun in hand. Then he jumped onto the steep slope. He slid quietly almost all of the way down. Then his boot struck a patch of shale, sending sound rushing toward the seated men.

Clemont whirled to his feet, his face graying in sudden fright, his hand stabbing for his gun. Starks turned, dropped flat on his face, his six-shooter lined toward Lacy.

Lacy finished his sudden plunge, one hand outflung to brace him erect, the gun in the other blasting hot lead at the two men. He shot with a nerveless skill, unnoticing of the bullets that cut the bank at his side.

Starks coughed lightly, twitched

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momentarily, then was still. Lacy's bullets had drilled the life from him in two merciless shots.

Then Clemont dropped his gun, cowered back against a huge rock. Fear rode high in his face, fear of the man before him who had appeared so suddenly in the badlands' hideout.

"Don' shoot, Keever," he cried terrifiedly, "I give up."

Disgust filled Lacy at the other's cowardice. He advanced slowly, expecting treachery. But it was evident that the rustler was completely cowed; the sight of Lacy's gun had reduced his braggadocio to a mere whimper.

THE sudden shots had startled the horses until they were almost frantic with fear. Shrill screams of pain arose as the milling horses were torn with the heavy barbs on the fence.

Lacy dropped his gun, loosened his belt with a deft flick of his fingers. His face was set, as he tensed five feet from Clemont.

"Get 'em up, you dirty dealing horse-beater," he snapped, "you've had this coming for a long time."

Clemont hurled himself forward, fighting with the desperation of a cornered wolf. His heavy arms flailed madly, seeking to batter the other into instant unconsciousness.

Lacy gave ground, the ferocity of the other driving him momentarily off his balance. Then he shifted, moved lightly out of the other's way. His left fist reached, caught Clemont's face, forced the man back a yard. Then his right caught Clemont's chest, made the man gasp in sudden agony.

Clemont stumbled backward, screamed suddenly as the inch-long barbs of the corral raked his back. Blood streamed from a dozen cuts, as he tried to batter his way from the fence.

Lacy was merciless as he drove the rustler time and again into the fence. Clemont's body was ripped and gouged by the barbs, sliced as though by a hundred razors. He cried out again, as one of the barbs slit his face from ear to mouth, then sank fainting to the ground.

Lacy leaned against a post, his breath heavy in his chest, his arms hanging wearily at his sides.

"Where's the money?" he asked sharply.

"Fenton's got it." Clemont's hands were pawing at his face.

"Get up." Lacy waited until the man arose, made certain that none of the cuts were dangerous, then spoke again.

"We're driving the horses back to my spread," he said, "then we're going back to town."

He belted on his gun, mounted Starks' horse. Within minutes, the stolen herd was racing madly toward their home spread.

WING LOO stood in the kitchen doorway of his small restaurant, his pudgy hands folded complacently over his rotund stomach. His eyes smiled at the broad-shouldered Lacy, but his face was bland, unsmiling.

"One steak?" he asked gravely.

Lacy grinned as he sat at a table. There was still a look of wonder and awe in his wide eyes. His hands trembled a bit as he rolled a quirly.

"Wing," he said, "a baby's no longer than that!"

He spread his hands to illustrate. Wing Loo smiled slightly.

"Me know," he said.

Lacy looked straighter at the oriental. "You butter-colored heathen," he said, "there isn't any more sentiment in you than there is in a goat."

Wing Loo polished the nails of one hand on the palm of the other. He laughed silently within himself; he had known Lacy almost thirty years.

"Me know," he said, then straightened, "One steak?" he finished.

Lacy tore the cancelled note with steady fingers. He felt like laughing suddenly; why, he didn't know.

"One steak," he said, "someday the kid and I'll order two!"

"Can do." Wing Loo drifted back into the kitchen.

THE END

TRAIL AND SADDLE

Fact Articles of the Old West

LUKE SHORT was drinking at the bar when tough Charlie Storms came into the saloon. Storms had his sixshooter in his hand; there was rage in his heart. Luke Short, unmindful of his danger, had his sixgun in holster. Storms was raising his Colt when Luke Short glimpsed him.

loud and certain tones just what he intended to do to Luke Short. Luke Short smiled and stepped into the street and confronted Courtright.

"Don't pull a gun on me," warned Courtright.

"I ain't got a gun," assured Luke Short.

Courtright studied the small man

DYNAMITE COMES IN SMALL PACKAGES

By Brett Austin

By all odds, Charlie Storms should have killed Luke Short. But, when the gunsmoke cleared away, Charlie Storms was dead. His gun was unfired. And powdersmoke trailed from the barrel of Luke Short's pistol. For Luke Short had drawn his .45 and shot before Storms could drop his hammer!

The gun-roar died down. The crowd of tough men gathered there in Tombstone's Oriental saloon stared at the dead man. Then Bat Masterson, the famous marshal, said huskily, "That was the fastest shootin' I've ever seen, Luke."

Luke Short smiled. "I was lucky," he said.

But Luke Short always had that same answer: He was lucky. He was a thin, short man of five foot four. He was a gambler and a gunman. He was one of the fastest gunhands in the early West.

He was a man of unlimited courage. Time after time he proved this fact before tough, seasoned men. Charley Storms had killed six men. Yet he had not stood a ghost of a chance before Luke Short's sixgun.

Later, in Fort Worth, Luke Short ran a gambling hall and saloon. The Purity League, headed by a gunman named Courtright, set out to clean up the town. Courtright stated in

critically. This was the way he liked to have his victims served. He let his hand fall to his holstered gun. Instantly Luke Short jerked a gun he had hidden under his shirt.

Courtright's gun was up. But, before the gunman could shoot, Luke Short's .45 roared. He shot off Courtright's thumb. Courtright shifted his gun to his other hand. Luke Short killed him. Later, Short was acquitted by the grand jury. And the Purity League died a premature death.

Luke Short returned to his gambling den.

Luke Short's career is not a thing to admire. He was a gambler; he drank much; he killed men. He had many enemies. But he had many friends, too. And he had more friends than he had enemies. Among his friends were the Earp brothers, Doc Holliday, Bat Masterson, and other famous Western men who, during the 80's and 70's, fought for organized law and society.

He was born in the East of poor parents. At twenty, he was skinning Buffalo in Kansas and Nebraska and selling the hides. A few years later, he was peddling rotgut whiskey to the Indians on the Red Cloud Indian Reservation. One day a group of soldiers rode into his camp.

THEY got the jump on him and tied him to a horse. They broke up his stock of whiskey and burned his shack. They tied his feet together under his horse. Then they took him to Sidney, Montana.

Luke Short bounced along. The soldiers grinned and joked. They put him on a Northern Pacific train headed for Omaha. Luke Short thought the whole matter over very carefully. He had had some whiskey buried on the hill behind his house. The soldiers had not found it. He was glad they had not dug around any. For if they had, they would have found the half-a-dozen Indians he had killed and buried on the hillside.

"If'n they'd a-found them Injuns," he said later, "they'd a-lynched me, sure as hell!"

But Luke Short never reached Omaha. He left the train in North Dakota. But he never again sold whiskey to the Indians. Nor did he go back to his whiskey cache, either. The Army, he decided, was too big for one man to fight. And Luke Short was a sensible man.

Once he went bond for a friend who had gotten into trouble. The friend skipped bond leaving Luke Short holding the sack for five thousand dollars. Luke Short and the county attorney were anything but friends. Short paid a visit to the attorney during a council meeting. He had his gun in his hip pocket.

"I move," he said, "that the attorney tear up the bond. Are there any objections? If so, gentlemen, state them now."

A short silence followed. Then the attorney's thin voice asked, "What does the council say?"

"Tear it up," said a man.

The attorney tore the bond in two.

One thing must be said in Luke Short's favor: he ran his gambling games on the square. Other houses used marked cards, had brakes on their roulette wheels, had loaded dice, crooked faro boxes. But not Luke Short's gambling houses. He ran clean games. He was a born gambler. If he couldn't win honestly, he lost. The stakes were high and the game up to snuff. His White Elephant in Fort Worth was one of the West's biggest houses of chance.

He was not a wanton killer. He killed only in self defense. Usually he had the law on his side. Because of his small stature many men deliberately picked trouble with him. But what he lacked in size he made up in his ability to handle a gun.

He invariably wore a checkered, gaudy suit and a flaming red silk shirt. That was his way of attracting attention. Perhaps too there was some inner egotism that had to be fed. He was a pygmy among a race of giants. But he moved through those hard big men with an assurance strangely alien to one of such small size. At his best he never weighed more than one hundred and forty pounds.

BUT what he lacked in weight, he made up in fighting ability. Several men learned this—to their sorrow—and word spread across the West. He was known in Denver, in Dodge City, in El Paso, in Fort Worth.

A big gambler, seeing Luke Short's gaudy clothes, once laughed out loud. When it was over the gambler lay on the sawdust floor of the saloon, sound asleep from the impact of Luke Short's gun-barrel. Short stepped across the inert form to the bar.

"Have a drink, men."

The moment before, a few had been grinning at the short man, but now that grin was gone—they hurriedly drank a toast to Luke Short. Whiskey mellowed the group and finally the fallen gambler came to. He lurched to the bar beside Luke Short, a foolish smile on his lips.

"What hit me, fella?"

"My gun."

The gambler frowned. "Sure didn't see you draw it," he admitted. He shook his throbbing head gingerly.

"You need a drink," diagnosed Luke Short.

The gambler drank. Soon he and Luke Short were friends. And they

remained friends for many years. After that, nobody in Leadville, Colorado, laughed at Luke Short. The episode with the big gambler had showed them that the quiet, sober little man could handle both his fists and his guns very dexterously.

Luke Short hated rotten politics. The mayor of Dodge City also ran a gambling house. When Luke Short started his establishment the customers of the Mayor decided they liked Short's emporium the better and thereby deserted the Mayor. The Mayor was going broke.

The Mayor promptly issued an edict banning music in saloons. Luke Short promptly fired his makeshift orchestra. But the Mayor kept his musicians. The next night the Mayor had his customers back and Luke Short's house was almost deserted.

On the following night, Luke Short had his orchestra blaring. He had his customers back, too. About midnight he went out for some air and, when he came back, the town marshal had jailed his orchestra. And down the street, music was spilling from the Mayor's saloon.

Luke Short went to the jail and freed his musicians. But the town marshal, aided by the friends of the Mayor, jumped him unawares, dumped him on a train going east, and told him to get to hell out of town. Too many guns were against him. Luke Short went. The Mayor settled back. He ran the town.... again.

But Luke Short came back. And with him came the Earp boys, Bat Masterson, and a host of friends. They marched into a council meeting, guns drawn. They were all hard men, armed heavily. The Mayor knew his game had run its course.

"What'd you want?"

"Get outa town," advised Luke Short. "Fire the marshal and the sheriff. I've got some of my friends here who want those two jobs. How about it, Marshal? You leavin'?"

The Marshal's face was pale. He looked at Wyatt Earp, the man who cleaned Tombstone; he stared at Bat Masterson.

"I'm leavin," he said.

"An' you, sheriff?"

"Me an' the Marshal," said the sheriff hastily, "are goin' pull out on the same train, Short. We never did like this country."

Thereafter, Luke Short controlled the gambling in Dodge City.

Thus Luke Short lived his hectic life, and enjoyed it. Though he went through numerous gunfights, he was never wounded. He died at the age of thirty-nine....and he died in bed!

THE END

TEXAS TERROR ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

By Lee Thomas

THEY WERE hanging Bill Longley in Giddings, Texas. The pioneer cowtown was filled with ranchers and cowmen who had come to see the famous young killer dangle at the end of a rope. Bill Longley waited in his cell, a cigar perched jauntily between his lips. Finally the deputies came.

"That time, huh?" asked Bill.

"This is it, Bill." One deputy handcuffed Bill's hands behind his back. "Let's go, fellow."

They went through the crowd. The steps leading up to the gallows were old and rickety. Bill Longley smiled and said, "Take it easy, boys. I might fall through one of these steps an' get crippled up!" He spat out his cigar and looked out over the crowd while they adjusted the noose around his neck.

A few minutes later he was dead. He hung limply against the taut rope, the soft Texas wind gently swaying his inert body to and fro....

Bill Longley was a killer—a wanton

killer. He demanded little, if any, respect. Rather he is a man to be pitied. Behind him he left a trail of blood and death. He is credited with the dubious honor of killing thirty-two men before he met his death at the end of a rope.

Many of these were negroes. He had a mania for killing black men. When Bill Longley came into a Texas town the negro population either moved out or went into hiding. Some of the hardier colored men moved against the killer. They did not live to regret the foolishness of the reckless act.

Bill Longley was born of good, hard-working parents in Austin county, Texas, in 1851. At fourteen he was a deadly shot with either rifle or sixgun, on foot or on horseback. He attended school but a short time. His was a reckless lot, and his wanderlust led him far across the face of the untamed West. Many times he left a town hurriedly ahead of a posse.

One day the Texas Vigilantes captured Bill Longley and a man named Johnson. They took them to the nearest tree and speedily hung them. The result was fatal for Johnson, but luck rode with Bill Longley.

The drop did not break Bill Longley's neck. While he was dangling in mid-air the Vigilantes sent two shots at him. One hit him in the belly. But he wore a moneybelt loaded with gold pieces obtained in a recent holdup. The bullet deflected into space. The other bullet sang over Bill Longley's head and broke a strand in the rope. The Vigilantes rode away, thinking their good work was complete. Bill Longley hung there, strangling.

Then the rope broke. And a few hours later Bill's lawless friends were welcoming him back into the fold, and marvelling at his good luck.

One time he cleaned out a circus. He entered the main tent, his guns out, and proceeded to shoot up the place. The customers stampeded for exits. Some of them, knowing flight was the logical thing, ripped holes in the canvas wall, and scampered out to safety.

When the mad stampede ended, Bill Longley and two painted clowns were alone in the big tent. The clowns were dancing merrily, their antics being sponsored by well-placed shots from Bill Longley's pistols. They danced until Bill ran out of shells.

There is no record of Bill Longley matching guns with a good gunman. He picked on the minor gunslingers —petty killers, thieves, and ruffians. There is no record either of Bill Longley doing a lawful act in his short life. He never stayed in one place long. Some little incident would come up, friction would be created—Bill Longley's guns would talk, and another killing would be notched up against the Texan. And he would grab a handy horse and lope out of that section.

There was always a reward out for him. Once he collected a reward himself. He had two friends whose characters, though shady, were not tinted as badly as his. He rode up to their cabin one day.

"Boys," he said, "I've got a plan to make some money. Easy dinero, too."

THEY were interested, of course. The upshot of the conversation found them riding into the county seat, with Bill Longley their prisoner. They turned him over to the sheriff.

"Here's Bill Longley, sheriff. Captured him this mornin' when he rode up to our ranch aimin' to get a bit of grub. Heard there was a reward out for him. That true?"

"Reward! I'll tell a man there is —fifteen hundred bucks! Bill done killed Charlie Stuart's son. I'll get word to Charlie. He'll have the money here for you right pronto. Hey, Mike," he called to a deputy. "Ride out an' tell Charlie Stuart we got Bill Longley in jail."

Charlie Stuart paid the two hellions the money. They asked the sheriff if they could take one last look at Longley before leaving. The sheriff accompanied them to Bill Longley's cell. There they overpowered the lawman, tied him up and

locked him in one of his own pens. The trio rode unmolested out of town with the fifteen hundred dollars divided three ways.

"Good pay for a few hours' work," said Bill Longley.

One time he was in jail in Austin. There the sheriff found that he could not collect the thousand dollar reward that had long draped itself across Bill Longley's shoulders. The refusal to pay the reward naturally made the lawman indignant. He had risked life and limb to put Bill Longley behind bars. Now his efforts had proved futile. He studied Bill Longley who stood behind the rods.

"They double-crossed you," said Bill.

The sheriff swore under his breath. He was turning away when Bill Longley said, "Maybe we can dicker, lawman. . . ."

"In what way?"

"How much money do you want to turn me loose?"

The star-toter's eyes lighted. "How much you got, Bill?"

Bill Longley took off a boot. He borrowed the lawman's knife and split the boot leg open. He had almost six hundred dollars there in bills of larger denomination. He showed them to the hungry-eyed lawman.

"It's yours, if you turn me loose. Give me an hour start before you tell anybody I got away. How about it?"

"It's a deal, Bill."

Bill Longley spent over a year with the Ute Indians. The law was pressing him close so he decided to go into temporary "retirement." Here he learned the tongue of the Utes. He liked Indians. But the life was too dull so he moved again into the society of white men. And, of course, he took his two guns with him.

He fell in love with a minister's daughter. His courtship was ardent and brief. And, as can be expected, the man of the gospel objected to his matrimonial overtures. They had words. When Bill Longley rode out of town, his would-be father-in-law was dead.

This was too much for even tough Texas stomachs to stand. Rewards were posted and lawmen rode with guns high in holsters, one eye wary and suspicious of all strangers that came close to fitting the description of Bill Longley. But the Texas terror still roamed the plains and foothills.

A rancher named Anderson killed Bill's cousin, and Bill rode into Anderson's territory seeking revenge. Anderson was working in his garden and Bill shot him with a shotgun. Anderson had never seen him before. He lay on the ground, gasping for breath.

"Why—why did you shoot me?"

"Just for the hell of it," said Bill Longley.

When Bill Longley did ride for the law, he did it not to help society—he did it for personal gain. Once he heard there was a reward out for two horsethieves. He and a companion trailed the horsethieves to their hideout, captured them and turned them over to the law for the reward.

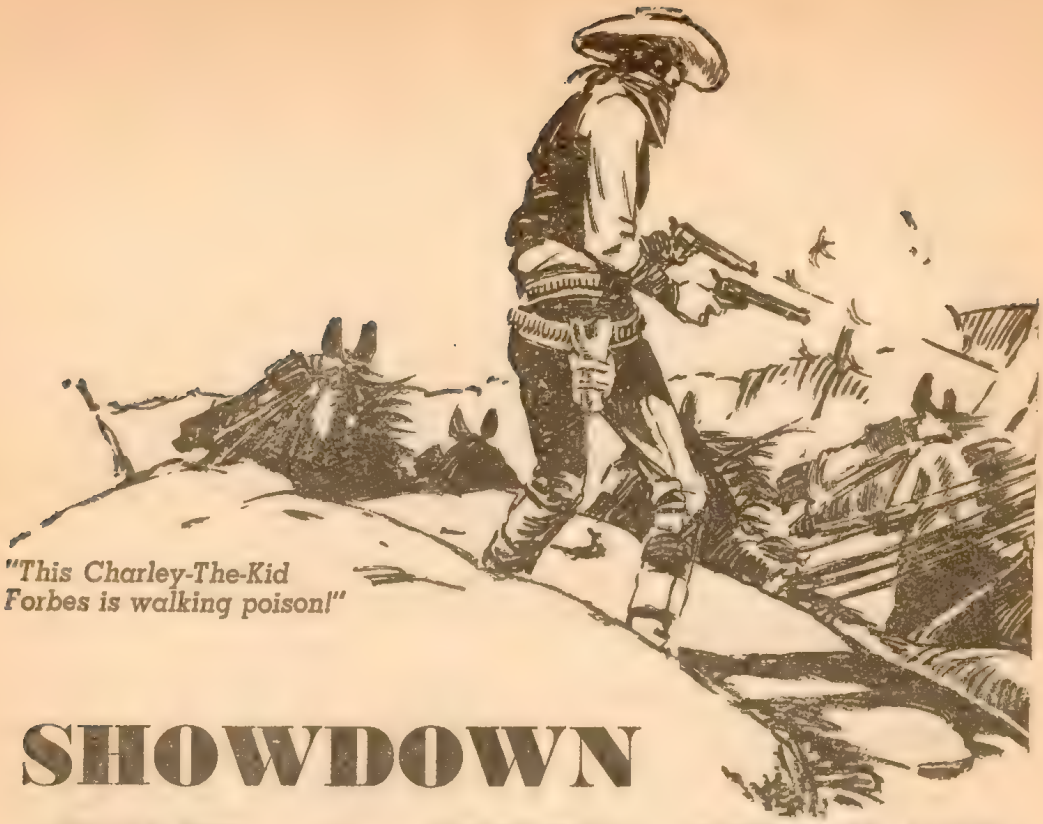
HE also hung the leader of the Vigilantes that had "hung" him. In fact, to do a good job, he hung the man to the same tree he himself had temporarily decorated. The Vigilante had not done a good job when he "hung" Bill. Bill Longley did not make the same error. When he rode away from the tree, the Vigilante was dead—and dead all over.

But any reign of terror—even though prompted by a lone gunman—had to come to an end. In May, 1877, Bill Longley was captured by Captain Milton Mast, in Louisiana. Mast took him back to Giddings, Texas.

"You'll hang this time," said the determined captain.

His trial was brief, and Bill Longley went to the gallows. There was a smile on his lips. Perhaps there was fear in his heart. But if there was, Bill Longley did not show it. He was smiling when the trapdoor dropped him into Eternity.

THE END



"This Charley-The-Kid Forbes is walking poison!"

SHOWDOWN FOR A GUN GHOST

By T. W. Ford

(author of "Trail of the Black Spade," "Blood is Thicker Than Law," etc.)

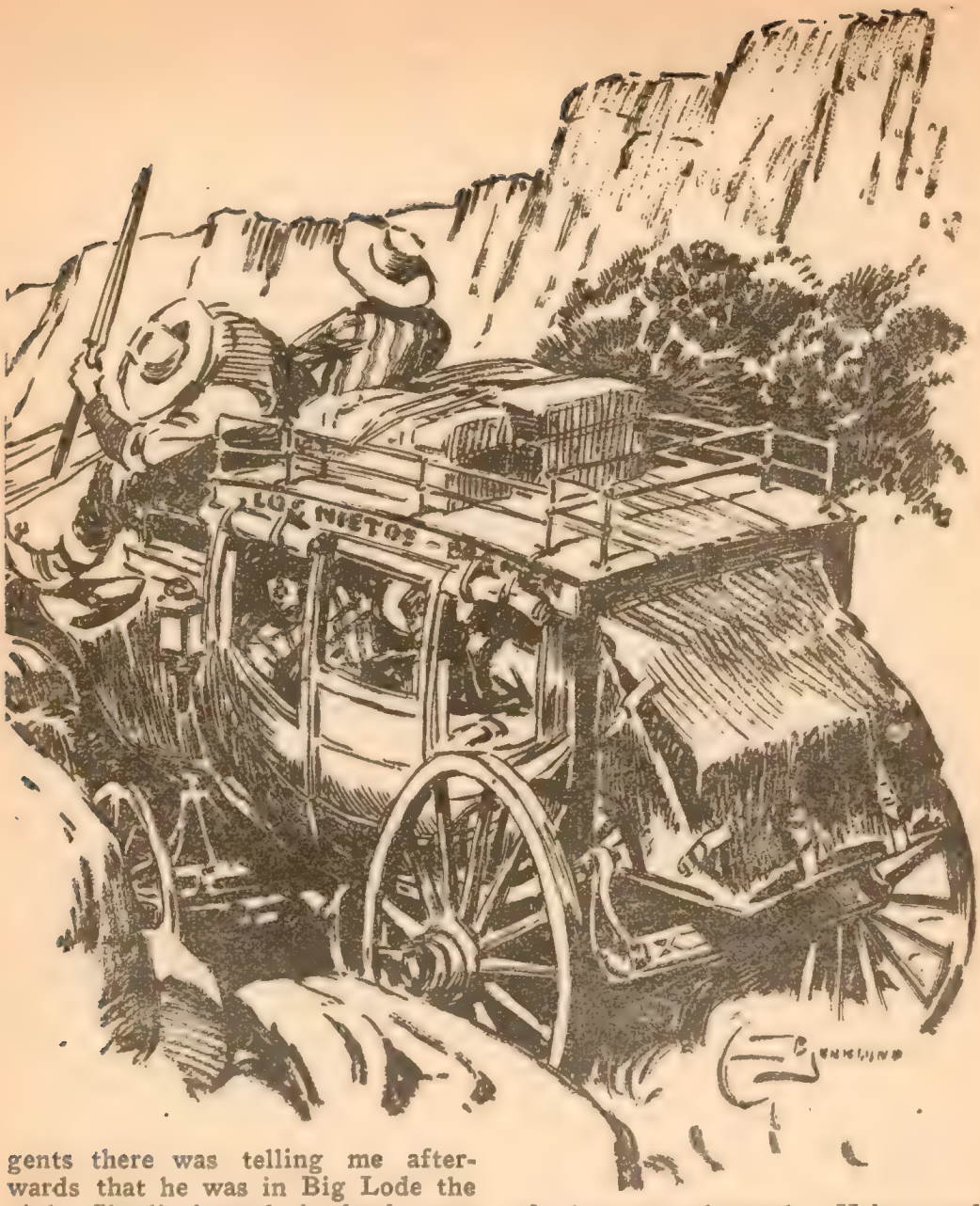
There was a legend about the mysterious and sinister Little Joe . . . they swore that the hombre had an Indian Medicine coat and no man could kill him while he was wearing it. Then along came Yucca Harkness, lawman, with a bigger legend behind him!

WHEN String Boyce drifted into the ramshackle bar in Skeleton, he had a grimy bandage knotted about his left wrist. What he told in explaining it mightn't have passed without suspicion if Boyce wasn't well known in the ghost town by the abandoned mine workings. But he was one of them, wanted himself on a horse-thief charge across the state line. Some of them remembered when he went under the handle of Hopkins.

"It happened up in Hogarty's Gulch," he told them. "There I was a-minding my own business, and these deputies come a-busting into the place and jumped this Charlie the Kid Forbes. And one of the stray slugs nicked me—me, an innercent bystander."

"Charlie the Kid Forbes?" the drink wrangler said. "Who is he?"

Boyce looked superior. "Well, it seems he's one slicker-'n-hell trigger tough. Got a real rep. One of the



gents there was telling me afterwards that he was in Big Lode the night Charlie busted the bank open single-handedly. They say he's plumb nervy and a lead-slammin' fool in the bargain."

"Did the deputies get him?"

"Get Charlie the Kid?" Boyce snorted. "Are you locoed? He's a big potato." Boyce was a man with news and very superior about it. "He smoked it out with them and got to a flight of stairs and up it. When they finally rushed it, he was gone. Had jumped to the roof of the next door place and made his getaway. And on the way he robbed the till of the store beneath. He's a real *malo hombre,* friends!"

The bar boss cocked an eyebrow. "You talk like you was a bosom pard of the fella. I bet you never heard of him till—"

"Minute I saw him I remembered having run into him over at Sojo a coupla years back! Sure I know about Charlie the Kid!"

"Sure," said one of the barroom toughs, edging over hopefully as Boyce threw down a bill for another drink. "String's right. He's been around and knows. I heard of this

Charlie the Kid more'n once. Why isn't he the one who smoked it out with Clay Allison of the Washita once?"

"Seems to me I remember hearing about that," Boyce said.

"Well, the name—Forbes—it is sorta familiar," the barman finally admitted. He slid his eyes toward the tall bony man with the sun-seared hawkish face stretching in the back doorway of the room but got no signal. "Yeah, Forbes. . . Uh-huh."

Boyce drained his drink and bit off a corner of a chewing tobacco plug. "That Yucca Harker showed yet?" he asked.

Heads shook negatively. That was the real big news in Skeleton, the thing they were waiting for. Yucca Harker was a special State officer, appointed by the governor. He was supposed to be one of the fastest men clearing holster leather of gun steel ever seen in the state and a hard-case relentless hellion on law-breakers. He had already shot it out with the Bloody Basin bunch and sent the living remnants of it fleeing south of the Line. He had killed the notorious Blackie Bottomley, the train robber, getting Bottomley when he was flanked by two of his bunch. And he had taken in Al Custer, the killer. Custer had advertised it for years that he would never be taken alive. But when he saw that this walking hound of Hell, Yucca Harker, had him dead to rights and it would be an even draw, Custer had surrendered.

THAT was the payoff, when Custer refused to smoke it out with Harker, face to face. Men knew how tough Harker was then.

And the word had drifted down the state that Yucca Harker had served notice he was going to clean out Skeleton, a lobo's nest. More particularly that meant he would have it out with Little Joe, the king killer of Skeleton and the man reputed to be a gun ghost.

Even most of the scum and ragtail in Skeleton didn't know exactly who Little Joe was. When he was called out for a showdown he appeared with a crimson bandana covering the lower half of his face. And when challenged by a lawman, he never failed to appear. He seemed to delight in being called out.

The strange thing was the story that he couldn't be killed. He wore a long gray coat that extended to below his knees when he faced a man, wore it buttoned tightly across his chest. And that coat was supposed to be bullet proof; an old-timer had seen him struck dead center and go down before he was toted off by his men. But that night he had walked into the lone bar of Skeleton, roaring drunkenly, and apparently unhit. A deputy from Jacob's Hill swore he had put lead in both Little Joe's legs before he fled into a hoeman's house whence his bunch rescued him. But the next day this Little Joe had gone swaggering down Skeleton's dismal street flanked by old caved-in houses, legs as sound as any man's.

"He ain't human," they said. "Nobody can kill him. Not with that coat on. . . They tell he got something from an old Injun medicine man. . ."

It was locoed but hard to disprove. Three John Laws had come to Skeleton with the avowed intention of ending the days of the killer whose depredations up and down the line were a state scandal. Two of them had marched down the road to meet him and died. The third had fled, wounded, but claiming he had put at least two slugs into Little Joe. Fatal wounds, too, he swore. Two nights later, Little Joe had walked into that peace officer's office and shot him as he lay on his cot.

That was the man they said Yucca Harker was coming to settle with. Harker who rode without a posse himself.

"Maybe he ain't a-coming," somebody said.

The drink wrangler shook his head. "That Harker, he ain't never failed to show yet once he's given notice he's after a man! That's part of his game some folks claim. He announces hes' going to hang the deadwood on a certain party and figures to find the

gent's nerve broken when he does walk in. He'll come."

Another day passed and there was no word of Harker around the country. "Maybe he tangled with that Charlie the Kid," somebody said.

"You mean that Forbes?" said a newcomer who had stopped off, passing through. He had the gunslinger stamp plain on him, had already inquired if any badge packers had been snooping around of late.

"You know him, pilgrim?" said the cadaverous hawk-faced man, shifting his chair where he had been drowsing in a corner. He signalled for a drink and the bar boss blew out his store teeth saying, "Sure, Janson, sure. Right away!"

"Heard of him," the stranger admitted. He drew a sack of makin's from the pocket of his crimson shirt. "Friend of mine, Dooty Hare, knew Forbes when he operated up in the Yellow Horse Hills. Coupla days back I heard Forbes—Charlie the Kid—held up a stage on the Rincon Trail. Right smack on the edge of the town, too. They were dumfounded because he had stolen a hoss in Rincon the day before and nobody figured he'd be that close. He's a hunk of poison for fair!" He spat. "He's nervy all right. Proud, sorta. Wears a red silk neckerchief at his throat—and won't take it off even though it'll give him away."

The lank Janson rose and stretched, dusty hat rubbing against the rafters of the low-ceiled place. "Sometimes a gent gets himself a big rep by runnin' off at the mouth a heap."

Red Shirt shook his head. "Couldn't be that way with Charlie the Kid. He got wounded in the throat once and can't talk much above a loud whisper. So he don't waste much time in bragging. Gimme a stogie 'fore I go, mister."

IT WAS late that night when One-Eye Gorty, who ran a little horse ranch up at the crossing to the north, rode in. He had news, double-barrelled news. A couple of deputies had been at his place, wanted to know if he had seen hide or hair of Charlie the Kid. They claimed he was wounded and in trouble and alone—he couldn't go much further. He also had chatted with a passing patent medicine drummer. Yucca Harker was getting close en route to Skeleton, he told—keeping his presence a secret. But the drummer had recognized him in the Travellers House over at Fesson City.

"What did he look like?" Janson asked, glancing up from a dog-eared solitaire layout at a side table.

"He didn't say. And I—well, I forgot to ask," Gorty admitted weakly.

Janson spat out his cold stub of cigaret disgustedly. "A chunkhead's born every minute," he said to nobody in particular. "By grab, Gorty, how would you like him to clean out Skeleton? What would you do? You never traded in honest ponies in your whole life!"

"To clean out Skeleton he'd have to get Little Joe fust," said Lowery, the pot-bellied slope-shouldered man who ran the two-bit feed lot and barn outfit in the town. For an hombre who often didn't do a whole piece of business in a week, Lowery always had a chunk of dinero on him. "This Yucca Harker's dangerous, though. He's slick as slobbers, they tell. Gimme another bottle, Gus. I'm going home and bed down."

He was still awake in his bed in the office of his livery stable, the bottle half empty on the chair beside him, when he heard the hard-drumming hoofs on the night. He hauled a Colts from under his yellowed pillow as he sat up, trained ear attuned. That pony was foundered and limping in the bargain. He wouldn't be able to go much further.

Then the animal was driving along Skeleton's single wandering street. There was a break in the hoofbeats, and Lowery heard them coming down the alley to his barn. He was out of bed and downstairs in the dark barn peering through a knothole as the rider dropped off. The latter hammered desperately on the barn door.

"Let me in, for the lovva Gawd!" he husked on the night. The desert wind parted the tree tops overhead and moonlight seeped through. Low-

ery saw a slight figure, powdered with dust, beside the head of a bogged-down dun cayuse. The man was hatless, his sandy hair ringed with a dirty strip of bandage. "I got dinero! Let me in!" He began to kick the door.

Lowery lighted a lantern and stood it just inside the small door before he unbarred it. Then he called for the rider to enter and faded back into the dimness, gun cocked. The man stepped over the threshold and into the barn, blinking, swaying on his boot heels.

"Hell, where are you?" he cried in a hoarse whisper, pawing at the red silk neckerchief at his throat as if he were choking.

And Lowery knew he was looking at this Charlie the Kid Forbes he had heard so much about.

"What do you want?" Lowery called.

"You gotta hide me! I'm Charlie the Kid. . . A damn posse is hard on my tail. I—" His whispering voice died as he slumped against a post.

"What did you come here for?"

"Hell! I heard there were gents in this hole who'd give a hand to a hairpin like me. I can always return a favor in—in a real way." He seemed completely exhausted.

A GUN spat on the night in the distance outside the cemetery-like stillness of the ghost town. Lowery came out of the dimness. The Kid had thumbed a couple of shells from his gun and was trying to insert them fumblingly into his own weapon. The holster of the second gun was empty. He seemed completely helpless.

"All right. Get your hoss inside," said Lowery as he swung open one of the big doors. Charlie the Kid half dragged in the glassy-eyed horse; it had a limp in its left foreleg.

Through the opening of the door, Lowery saw two riders appear on a hump beyond the ghost town. "That's them," croaked the Kid.

"Two?" Lowery spat in disgust. "Hell, I thought you were a *malo hombre,* Forbes! A posse of two—"

Forbes pointed at his head bandage. "I can't see so good right now. Can't see more than a few yards. By tomorra I'll be all right, though. Then I'll cut down some of them damn badge packers, by grab!"

Lowery paused only a moment, thinking, after he closed the door. Then he led the pony to the rear of the barn. The two unsaddled the animal quickly. Lowery sent it hobbling out into the feed lot behind. He told Forbes he could hide himself out in the feed lot.

"But if they sashay in here and find you, I don't know nothin'. I was blind drunk and you slipped in and hid yourself. *Sabe?"*

Charlie the Kid Forbes spat drily before he dragged himself up the ladder. "If they catch me, I won't be answering any questions afterward, because they'll never take me alive," he husked in that whispering voice. "Soon as they chucked me in a cuartel, that Yucca Harker would come around and cut out my heart—the slow way."

"You know him?"

"I killed his brother," Forbes said. Then he mounted unsteadily, finally pitching from sight in the loft. "They might not come around," he called down faintly despite the stillness. "There was a rider sloping off south as I cut inta here. Mebbe-so they're trailing him now."

Lowery waited a while. Then he climbed to the loft and heard the Kid's heavy, slow breathing, saw him where he lay like one dead, half under the hay, gun clutched in his bony hand, large and powerful for a slight-built man. Lowery went down and slipped out the back and moved off among the sage clumps in the sandhills at the edge of the town. He figured he had been pretty smart. Little Joe could always use a gent like Charlie the Kid in his camp. . .

It was chill and heavily overcast the next afternoon when Lowery and the haggard-faced Forbes moved down to Skeleton's lone barroom. Spasmodic sprays of rain rode before the wind. They went into the bar and had a couple of drinks. Nobody asked any questions. The inhabi-

tants of Skeleton didn't. Janson rose from a corner, stretching, and gave some kind of a signal to the bar boss before he ambled out the back.

The latter filled up their glasses. When they drained them Charlie the Kid slapped a bill on the bar, the bar man shook his head. "Mr. Janson invties you over to his place to have one with him," he said.

Lowery and Forbes left and walked down the road a stretch. They turned into a side path that elbowed around a large ragged pit where the earth had fallen in. Finally they came to a little shack out among the dunes. Neither horse tracks nor footprints marked the sand around it. But when they entered, Janson lounged behind one end of a rude table and four others sat around it.

"This is Charlie the Kid Forbes," Lowery said. "Like I told you."

Janson nodded and the others just stared. Forbes brushed sand and moisture from the red silk neckerchief at his throat. Grinned with his bleak eyes running over them slowly. They made a man feel as if the Kid was looking at something behind them.

"Hell, you chunkheads! Wake up. I always expect nothin' less than a brass band! I'm Charlie the Kid and everybody's heard o' me a-plenty. And my tonsils need irrigating."

WITHOUT saying anything, Janson picked up a jug from beneath the table and it was passed down. It was tequilla, Janson's favorite drink. Forbes slung it over an arm and put his mouth to the top and drank deeply. He gurgled and gurgled for some seconds, Adam's apple walking up and down his neck. He lowered it without gasping or sputtering.

"You over there by the stove," he said in that dry whisper, "you can plant your hogleg back in the holster. I'm among friends—I hope. Yeah, I know your a-holding it behind the pipe. A gent gets a certain look in his eyes when he's got a trigger eared back under his thumb."

The man blushed sheepishly and Janson stopped yawning, genuine admiration on his face. "What made you head in here, Forbes?"

"A slug that clipped my head. Don't see so good right now. Also the fact that I knew Skeleton don't have to curry the John Laws outa its whiskers more'n once a year."

"We got a way of handling 'em when they do stick their noses in," Janson admitted. "But maybe you heard Yucca Harker is headed for these parts. . ."

Forbes pulled out a tailor-made cigaret. "Well, I heard stories about a gent called Little Joe who cools off Harker and his breed dang pronto. I'd like to meet up with that Little Joe fella sometime."

"We'll see," said Janson sleepily. "Squat yourself. They's a box there."

One of the others said, "Figger to hang around long?"

Forbes nodded. "Been thinking. Might be a right good idee just to let these John Laws cool off. I been doing all right of late, anyways." He brought a hand from his pocket and tossed a roll of gold-backed bills on the table. "And how about gettin' a few more jugs of redeye and starting a little cyard game? Mebbe-so you gents and me could swing some business in these parts together, too." He laughed in that same dry whisper. "Me, I never like to let my guns get rusty."

Janson laughed without mirth but nodded his approval. "Lowery, you wanta pick the boys to go for the redeye? If it's all right with you." Janson never seemed to give any orders.

A game of stud got under way when the men came back with the redeye. The day died and one of the men made some chow of jerked beef and greasy beans. Some left and another man drifted in. The game continued without break as thunder in the north ushered in the night. The jugs kept going around and Forbes put out the dinero for another one later in the evening. He also lost more than three hundred dollars and drew another chunk of dinero from his money belt as if it were nothing.

Lowery slid half off his chair and

snored loudly. Two of the others staggered out into the night, homeward bound. Another staggered over to a bunk in the corner and dropped off. Charlie the Kid and Janson faced each other across the table. Forbes stopped riffling the deck and threw it against the bottle that held the candle that lighted the room.

"When that Yucca Harker hits here, I'll admit, I got sense enough to make tracks."

Janson massaged the jaw of his predatory face with big-boned knuckles. "That so?"

"Yep. Because this Little Joe isn't going to burn down Harker like he's handled other snooping badge packers. Too bad. But—well, this Little Joe is going to go to Hell on a shutter."

Janson's face hardened imperceptibly. "You think so?"

"I know it. I saw Harker shoot once. He's plain double-barrelled poison—a walkin' lead-spitting devil. Have another drink?"

They talked of other things. Charlie the Kid told about the time he raided a bank in a Border town and hid out in the sheriff's own privy. They drank steadily. Janson told about the time Seely, the U. S. marshal, came in looking for Little Joe. How the marshal was taken out, looped across his saddle, dead.

"Oh, that Little Joe must've been good all right. But his luck has run out now. I know Yucca Harker." He yawned.

JANSON'S leathery skin drew drum tight over his face bones. He smote the table a heavy blow. "Ye don't know Joe! He can't be killed! I—know."

Charlie the Kid nodded knowingly. "Sure. I heard that one. About the heap big medicine of that gray coat. I know. He's probably fast as spittin' lightning so that nobody's really got a chance to hit him yet. But this Harker is faster 'n anything human, and a dead center shot."

Janson rose to his gaunt height to put some wood in the stove. "Little Joe is the best gol-danged son of Hell with a hogleg in his—" But Charlie the Kid waved him silent wearily, shoved over the deck of cards. "I'll cut you—best two outa three—for fifty, Janson. And let's have another drink."

Janson won the cut and chucklingly pocketed the fifty smackers. They had several more slugs of the redeye, Forbes cursing his gambling luck. He kept sloshing redeye in their tin cups. "I hear this Little Joe can't carry much whiskey," he said suddenly after draining another shot.

Janson spat into a corner, face darkening. He picked up the jug that time, filling the mugs to the brim. "Never saw a man he couldn't toss 'em down with!. . . You with me on this one?" They drank.

Some fifteen minutes later, Janson's long chin was on his chest and he dozed. Silently Charlie the Kid rose and slipped out the door to glide off among the dunes. . .

It was broad daylight when Charlie the Kid came out of the sage and walked unconcernedly to the shack. The only tracks about it were his own left in leaving it. Yet when he pushed open the door and found it empty inside he showed no surprise. He looked in the door of the shed off it, saw nobody, and went back and had a drink from one of the jugs. Then he dropped into a chair, after unbuckling his guns and placing them on the table, and napped.

He was the picture of an hombre among friends and with nothing to fear when Janson himself inched open the door from the shed. Janson stood studying him for a long time, a cocked gun held flat against his leg. One of Charlie the Kid Forbes' eyelids fluttered open. He grinned.

"Where the hell were you?" Janson grated.

Charlie the Kid seemed surprised he should be asked. Shrugged. "Holy snakes, Janson. I'm smart. Me, I don't aim to get snapped in any trap when this Harker walks in. And you never can tell when he'll hit here. I went out and caught my shut-eye in the brush." He made no move to protect himself.

Janson scrutinized him, then holstered his gun. Spoke over his shoul-

der to others in the shed behind him. When he opened the door wide and entered, though, the shed was empty. Charlie the Kid appeared not to notice. He slid the jug across the table. Outside, the blotched fever sore of sun burnt through overcast sky to give the day a sullen unreal look.

Janson bestrode a chair, fingering beard stubble. "Now things're coming back to me. It was 'bout six-seven years ago you held up the Pioneer Limited plumb in the station at Steerhead, weren't it? Shot it out with and killed Smoke Lang, the sheriff, there, too." He had evidently been talking with somebody since Charlie the Kid left.

"Right—and wrong," the latter said. "It was at Steer Run. And I shot it out with Smoke—but I didn't kill him."

Janson actually gave a friendly grin then before he tilted the jug. "Yeah, that's it. I got a mite mixed up."

Charlie the Kid said, "Did Little Joe ask that?"

"Maybe," said Janson.

"I sure would like to have met up with that gent while he was still alive, by grab!"

Janson jerked up straight in the chair. "Holy snakes, he's still alive! You talk as if he—" His voice was sharp, torn with emotion.

Charlie the Kid smiled wisely. "Not for long, Mr. Harker's coming." Janson rose and started to speak. Charlie half turned his back as he cupped a match to a cigaret. "Now don't be giving me that stuff about how this Joe is something supernatural—or a walkin' dead man—or any of that wind-bellied stuff. His luck's run out. Harker'll get him!"

"SHUT UP!" Janson snarled fiercely. His lidded eyes glittered and sweat stained his forehead. "I'll tell you something, dammit! None of them dumb badge packers who've come in here for him—none of 'em have gotten a shot at Little Joe! Never! He's too damn smart for 'em."

"Wh-what?" Forbes sneered.

"By Gawd, that's true. I'll tell you—I'll tell you." He was a man shouting against his own ragged nerves. "Most of 'em around here don't know it, but some of the old mine workings run right plumb under this ol' ghost town itself. And Little Joe—he knows them workings like the palm of his hand. He—" He broke off as he sighted something through the grimy window. Then a running man burst in the door.

"A fella just come into the bar," he panted. "A deputy I reckon. Brought a message from Yucca Harker. He's outside now, and he's callin' Little Joe. Harker says he'll be comin' down the street at high noon. And if Little Joe don't show, he's going to burn the place to the ground and smoke out every last polecat. That's what he called us!"

Janson was indifferent, stretching lazily. "I'll go take the word to Joe. . ." He moved toward the door to the shed. "Charlie, better hunt yourself a hole. Go down to the bar and you'll see Little Joe handle this Yucca man. . ."

The sullen spot of sun glared down from directly overhead. Midday. Skeleton lay in the brush and sand like its name, dead and dry and inert, in a torpor. Only from the cracked shutters of the barroom did a few pair of eyes peer furtively. The rest of the ragtag and scum that composed its population had hunted safety in the brush. A lean packrat moved unhurriedly and curiously along the ragged fringe of the single street. Then he halted, head lifted. Down by the corner where the Buffalo Girl Dance Hall had stood in the old days, a human figure stepped past its barnlike frame.

The man moved to the middle of the road and then advanced purposefully, tanned hands hooked over gun butts, head swivelling from side to side nervously. "Yucca. . ." There was no voice that said it. It just went up like a soft swelling echo. Then one of the men behind the barroom shutters croaked: "Holy snakes, it's that same red-shirted one who was here the other day tellin' about Charlie the Kid! Ain't it?"

It was. But nobody answered him

in the airless, closed-up bar. Something had happened there.

Down in the other direction a figure swathed in a long, gray coat appeared from the brush. His sombrero was yanked low and a red bandanna screened the lower half of his face. He advanced in short, quick and yet unsteady strides like a desperate man. The butts of guns protruded from the coat pockets and his jerking hands suddenly clamped on them and half drew. The pair drew to within twenty-odd yards of each other, the gray-coated one having already passed the barroom. He halted, sidled hesitantly.

From the flat roof of the one-storied barroom, Charlie the Kid Forbes shouted, "Hey, Little Joe!" But his voice was sharp and harsh with threat, no longer a whisper. And the figure that had seemed to step out of the ground amid the litter of caved-in shacks and debris off from one side of the road twisted. He too had his face masked with a red bandanna.

Atop the sagging-roofed bar, Charlie the Kid went for his holsters. Hoglegs seemed to spring into the hands of Little Joe, a tall, lank figure, as he scuttled sideward in the brown grass. Then their weapons were acrash, spanging lead bridging the distance behind them. A hole gaped in Little Joe's hat. A slug ripped through the side of Charlie the Kid's shirt and seared the flesh over his ribs. But he was somehow an implacable little figure; he gave no sign of it. Lead drilled Little Joe's shoulder and knocked him down. He rolled behind a rotting piece of cabin wall. Charlie the Kid leaped from the roof and raced through the brush.

THE dying reverberations of shots came from the road. The red-shirted deputy had opened fire coolly after the gray-coated one had triggered twice frantically. The latter had hit ground and rolled twice when his gray coat flopped open and his mask fell off. It revealed him as pot-bellied Lowery, the livery stable man; he was shot in the leg and the hip.

Charlie the Kid zigzagged as he neared the debris where Little Joe had gone down. Charlie rounded a hummock and searched in vain for his man. And then a gun barrel followed by a lean arm, next by the masked face, rose from the sand stealthily. Rose from the small hidden hole of a cave-in that led to a tunnel of the old mine workings into which he'd been trying to crawl like a snake. Charlie the Kid wheeled and the gun muzzles frothed red.

Little Joe writhed up and up into full view like a stung thing, writhing in the agony of the death wound that had blasted a hole in his head. His guns slid to the sand. Then he went crashing forward as he buckled into the brush. A twig of the latter twitched the bandanna from his face and revealed the hawkish cold features of Janson. . .

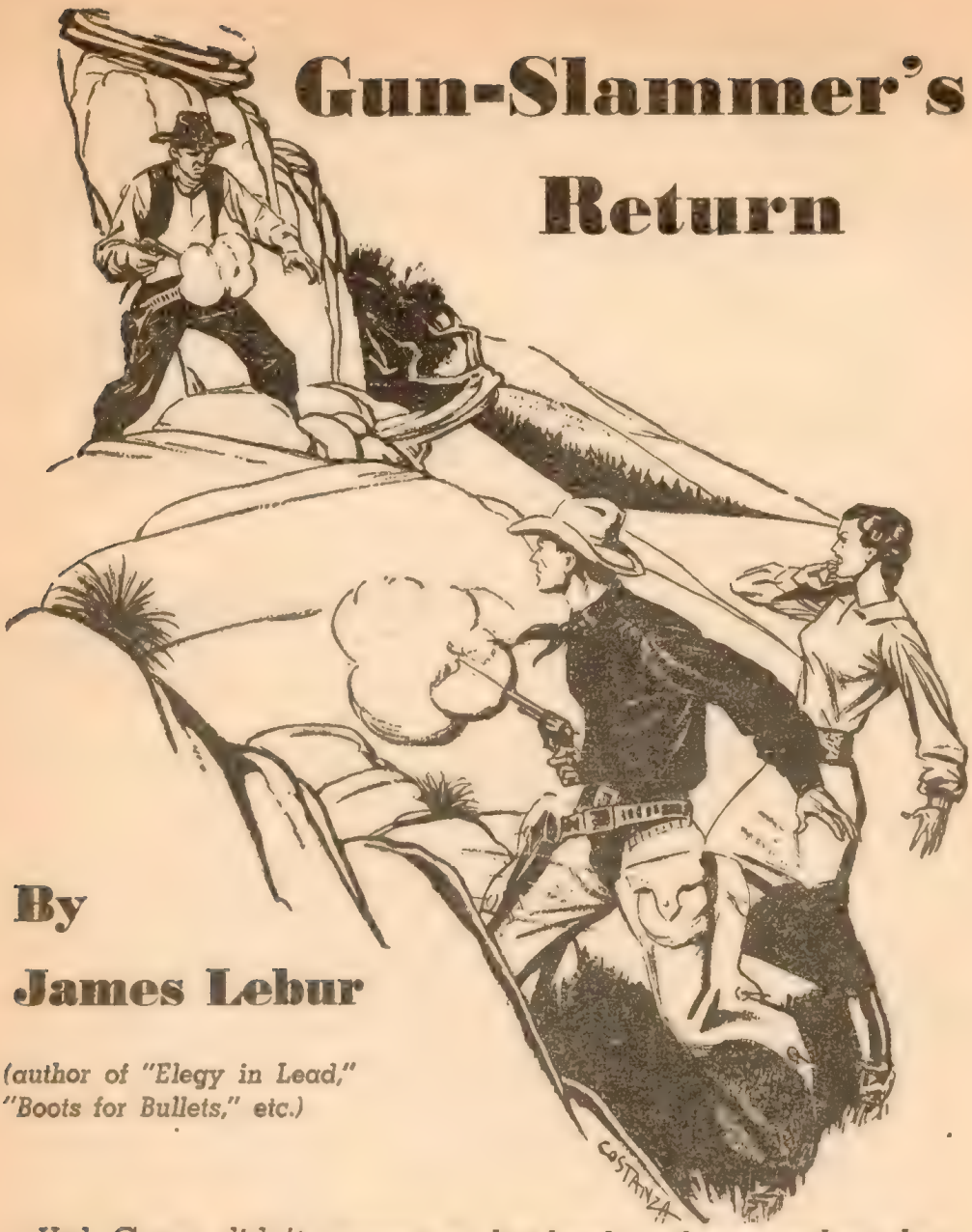
Back in the barroom the drink-wrangled bar-boss sat on the floor, rubbing a lump on his skull. Out in the wastes of Skeleton a report drifted at times as the deputies hunted out the cowed, fleeing inhabitants from their warrens. Lowery sat propped on a chair in agony, cursing feebly. "Y-you—you're Yucca Harker!" he threw at Charlie the Kid. The latter nodded quietly.

"I always said I never heard o' that Charlie the Kid Forbes," the bar-boss said, trying to be superior.

Yucca Harker shook his head as he lifted a drink and passed another to Red Shirt. "You're still wrong, mister. He existed—because I was him afore I went straight. That's why Janson was fooled. . . I went to the Big House an' got a governor's pardon, as Forbes, when I saved the warden's life in a prison break. Then I took back my old family name, Harker. . . The only thing that wasn't on the level was the gunfight at Hogarty's Gulch. Me and some of my boys faked that. But I am Yucca Harker—and Charlie the Kid Forbes. That's why I knew Janson—Little Joe—was going to get his chips cashed. . ."

THE END

Gun-Slammer's Return



By James Lebur

(author of "Elegy in Lead," "Boots for Bullets," etc.)

Hal Gage didn't expect a hot-lead welcome when he returned to the broken-down remains of his ranch, but there was a bigger surprise still in store for him!

A SPANGING sheet of sound rippled across the hills as the breath of a bullet whispered close to Hal Gage's ear. Surprise and anger raced through him, but his actions were instinctive. He rolled from his pony and hit the ground, his high body hidden by tall grass, his six-gun palmed.

From the shuttered windows of the adobe ranch house a bright flame lanced. Diehard, his pony, kicked up his heels and galloped off, hunting for a safer place. Gage leveled his six-gun at that shuttered window and triggered twice. The sound eddied and echoed over the swelling ground.

Half kneeling, crouched low enough to be hidden by the brush, he watched the house. No reply came

to his missiles and he edged himself forward slowly. He could not understand this reception.

It had been ten years since he had seen the low ranch house that had been his home. Gray eyes narrowing on the wind-pitted walls and sun-blistered wood brought back poignant memories. The big barn had once been the cynosure of all eyes. It had been painted a glorious red and the clean, white-washed walls of the main dwelling had made a pretty contrast. Bright flowers had bordered its long veranda and the pole corrals had been well stocked with horseflesh.

It was no longer that. The roof looked as if a good wind would lift it bodily. The crimson of the barn had faded to a dirty pink and where the paint had blistered and peeled, were dun-colored spots the size of a man's head. The corrals were empty and not even a wisp of smoke curled from the stone chimney. The entire ranch looked deserted, ghost-ridden. But it had been no ghost that had placed that bullet so close to his head.

A hot wind whipped across the tall grass, lifted little whirlpools of dust. The stifling heat of a noonday sun beat against his bared head, reflecting like burnished copper from the fiery red of his hair. It was not more than a hundred yards to the house and with the entire yard overgrown with weeds and grass, he made it without receiving any more reply from his unseen assailant.

He prowled the barn first and shook his head in puzzled bewilderment. Like the corrals it was empty of stock. The bunk house was the same. There were no blanket rolls or war sacks, nothing but the straw-filled mattresses of the former tenants. It gave him a queer feeling when he stealthily made his way through the rear of the house. There was nothing to show that anyone had lived here for years except the coffee pot on the cold stove.

But some one was here. Ghosts don't trigger rifles. Remembering how the second shot had nicked his horse, made his lips curl in a snarl of rage. Hal's assailant had committed the unpardonable sin of shooting at his horse. Moving soundlessly down the long hall he reached the door of the big living room.

The shutters were closed and for a moment it was difficult for him to make out objects in the dimly lit interior. Then he saw the shadowy blurred figure slumped below one of the windows. A rifle lay on the floor and one hand still gripped the stock.

"Reach, you bushwhackin' son," Gage growled, gun cocked and menacing.

THERE was no answer and no movement of the huddled figure and the cowboy's hair lifted, an uneasiness creeping over him. Silently he reached the window and the prone figure.

"Gawd Awmighty!" he exclaimed in a choked voice. "I've killed a woman."

The prone figure was a young girl. A thin pennant of light streaking through a shutter touched her dark hair and the trickle of crimson that welled from a wound in her head. One of Gage's slug had cut a deep furrow along her scalp, knocking her out.

Taking the rifle from her clenched fingers, he got water and turpentine from the kitchen. Propping her in a chair with her head bent back, he cleaned the wound and swabbed it with turpentine. It was the hot sting of the antiseptic that brought her back to consciousness and her eyes opened to focus on him, filled with terror.

"Take it easy, ma'am." He saw the fear in her eyes and tried to stifle it. "Give your head time to clear. I ain't goin' to hurt you."

Clumsily, with the girl's lustrous dark eyes watching him, he bound the wound. The feeling of her soft hair at his finger tips sent pleasant little shocks up his arms. He talked to relieve his tension and hers.

"My name is Gage. Sunset, most people call me 'cause of my red hair. My Dad used to own this ranch. This was my home. Mom died when I

was a shaver and Dad married Mamie Fork. She and me never got along together and when he was killed I pulled freight. I couldn't stand the thought of havin' Abe Sulzer for a stepfather. I didn't come back expectin' trouble. I proved my right to the ranch, paid up the back taxes, got a deed to the place, signed and recorded with the authority of the circuit court."

The bandaging was finished and he stood there with his hat in his hand, waiting for her to speak, looking down at her, conscious of the smoothness of her cheeks, of the way her lips curved pleasingly, of the deep brown shining eyes. The thought of how close he had come to killing her gave him a cold feeling inside.

"Why do you tell me all this?" Anger replaced the fear in her eyes. "I know who you are. You're another one of the Diamond Tail crew. I knew you were when I saw you sneaking up the creek. Where is my father? What have you done to him." Her voice rose and her hands gripped the chair arms.

FEARING she was going to get up, he pushed her gently back in the chair. "Easy, ma'am. I ain't no Diamond Tail waddy. I told you the truth when I said I owned this Slash 8 spread. I've got the deed to prove it. And I ain't seen your dad. Naturally when you bushwhacked me, I figured Abe Sulzer was hankerin' to contest my deed with gunsmoke. If I'd known there was a woman, I'd have cut off my right hand 'fore I'd have shot. But how come you and your dad are livin' here? I don't savvy."

His earnestness seemed to reassure her. "Abe Sulzer owns the Diamond Tail and he warned us if we weren't off this property by sundown last night, he'd drive us off. Dad bought this ranch at a tax sale last year. He's a veterinary. This place was cheap and we figured it would be better living out here than in town. Dad went into town to get the sheriff."

"And he left you here to hold the fort?"

She nodded. "But he's been gone for hours. He should have been back unless something happened to him."

He grinned down at her encouragingly. He liked this girl's fortitude. "There's nothin' to stop us from huntin' him, ma'am," he suggested. "Maybe the sheriff wasn't in."

"But I haven't a pony. Dad rode the mare into town. All of our stock has been stolen during the last two weeks."

Gage's long lips tightened and his jaw hardened. "Abe Sulzer, eh? But it still don't stop us. Diehard can carry double and I'm right anxious to get this ownership thing settled. If you bought this place at a tax sale, looks as if something was wrong. If you feel up to it, ma'am, I'll whistle for my bronc and we'll start.

"Go ahead and whistle!"

Gage whirled and a piping thin voice warned, "Don't lift it, stranger."

A tall, round-shouldered man, thin as a willow weed, stood there with his gun leveled and cocked. "I ain't itchin' to kill no wandering cowpoke," he said, grinning crookedly, "but I'll shore drill you plumb center if you drag your hogleg. Get out of that chair, Maida. You were warned to get off this spread. Now I'm goin' to see that you do as you're told. Your paw's dead."

The girl's hands flew to her mouth and tears welled into her eyes. Gage's glance clashed with the intruder's. If he was one of Abe Sulzer's hands, he was like his employer cold-blooded and thoughtless of anyone's feelings. It was a callous way to tell the girl that she had lost her father.

"How do you know her father is dead?" Gage demanded, truculently.

The man shrugged. "We found his carcass over by the north fork of the river. I reckon his pony threw him. His head was all bashed in."

"You lie," the girl cried, hysterically. "That mare wouldn't throw a child. You killed him."

GAGE'S eyes slitted. Something had clicked in his memory. His father had died in that same fashion, his skull crushed from what had appeared to be an accident.

His stepmother had announced her intentions of marrying Abe Sulzer almost immediately. Had both of these deaths been accidents?

"I wouldn't waste good lead on no horse doc," the man retorted. "Come on. Get out of that chair." His cold eyes raked Gage and he came closer, lifting the waddy's gun from its holster, and sticking it in his waistband.

Gage helped the girl from the chair and supported her with his arm. "Keep your chin up," he whispered, "and don't let on that you know who I am. We're not licked yet."

The Diamond Tail man heard that and he laughed. "When you both start hittin' the trail on shank's mare you'll think you are. There's forty miles of desert between here and Lordsburg. Abe'll sure send a couple of waddies along to see that you get far enough." Suddenly he laughed again as they reached the yard. "By criminy!" he exclaimed. "Abe'll like that. I'm goin' to tell him we caught you bendin' over Jed Ranz' body. You'll have a tough time sweatin' out of that, my bucko."

"I thought you said her father's death was accidental," Gage snapped and there was irony in his voice.

The man shrugged and laughed. "Sure, it looked like it, but you can't tell how the sheriff might figure things. Say! What's your name and how come you was coyotin' around the Slash 8?"

"That's my business," Gage retorted, sourly.

The man had roped Diehard and the big roan stood there waiting. He gave a neigh of relief when he saw his master and Gage helped the girl up to his back, then swung on behind.

Two other Diamond Tail cowhands rode up from the creek bed, grinned mockingly at the girl, and gave the redheaded strange cowboy inquisitive looks. At their foreman's orders they kneed their mounts and the cavalcade moved off in the direction of the Diamond Tail spread. Off to his left Gage could see the jagged crests of the Dragoons, the mountains he had quitted only a few days previous. And he knew that stretch of desert in between. It was bone dry, littered with the bleached bones of cattle and buffalo. It would be impossible for a man to cross it on foot. The nights would freeze a man's blood and the days suck the moisture from his body.

THE sun had dropped behind the crests when the group reached Sulzer's spread. The girl was taken into the house and Gage forced to enter the big barn. Here the two hands thonged his wrists with rawhide, shoved him into a box stall, and padlocked the door. It had evidently been built for a vicious stallion. The sides reached almost to the ceiling and it was stoutly built of hewn planks. The marks of the animal's hoofs were plainly visible.

A few minutes later Sulzer came out to look at the prisoner. He grinned when he saw him, then took a closer look and surprise lighted his eyes. "Damme if it ain't the redheaded Gage button grown up!" he exclaimed.

Gage looked at the repulsive, hooked nose man who would have been his stepfather if he had remained at home, and his eyes were like blazing bonfires. "You killed my dad, Sulzer. I know it now. I'm goin' to live to see you swing for it."

Sulzer fell back from the anger that flared, then caught himself and white ridged his lips. "For a killer you talk big," he snarled. "I've sent one of the boys for the sheriff. He'll be out after supper. And you'd better not get any smart notions of runnin' away. I've given orders to shoot you if you try."

Gage did not bother to answer. Sulzer was holding all the aces. There was no use trying to draw to a bob-tailed flush against such odds.

As they padlocked the door, Gage heard Sulzer say, "Keep Mamie away from him, savvy. She might get soft-hearted and try to turn him loose. She mothered him for a spell. I don't take no chances with that gal. She's ten years his senior, but he's a good lookin' jackanapes and she'll jump through the hoop for any man that'll give her a tumble."

It made Gage remember the woman who had been his stepmother. Mamie Fork had been twenty-five years younger than his father. She had been a full-breasted, handsome woman with thick tawny hair and green-flecked yellow eyes; a woman whose lips were full and inviting, whose every movement was an invitation to a man. Gage had hated her for the sidelong glances she gave other men. From Sulzer's talk, Mamie had not changed.

DARKNESS settled over the range. Gage struggled with his bonds and found no give to the stout rawhide. Surveying the box stall he found an iron trough in one corner. There was about an inch of water in it. By backing up to it, by curving his spine, he managed to get the rawhide into the liquid. It was a painful posture, but he persisted until the rawhide began to stretch and he had his hands free.

He had no illusions as to what he was up against. He was a stranger in the county and the sheriff would take the rancher's word as gospel. Once they got him in the jail in Tongwood, his goose was cooked. These ranchers made short work of killers. Sulzer would poison their minds against him in spite of the fact that he could prove he owned the Slash 8.

Examining the door he found that it would be no trick to force it, but the noise would bring every hand in the Diamond Tail towards the sound and he had no gun. He would have to bide his time. He heard voices from the yard and the sound of footsteps. Quickly slipping his hands back into the rawhide, he stood with his back against the stall and waited.

The door was unlocked and Sulzer stood there holding a lantern. There were two other men and Maida Ranz. Her dark eyes as she looked at him were filled with scorn. She came into the box stall with the rancher backing her, an evil grin on his swart face.

"You filthy ambusher," she ranted at him. "I wish I had killed you." Crossing the intervening space she took a quirt from behind her and slashed him across the face. "That's only part payment. I know what you are now. If they don't hang you, I'll shoot you myself."

There was a livid welt across his face from the lash and it took all his will power to keep from showing these men that his hands were not tied. He had an insane desire to wrench the quirt from her hand and give the rancher his due.

Sulzer took the whip from her and pushed her back. "She's goin' to testify against you, Gage. I just wanted you to know. I was kind of hopin' you might make a break so's I could shoot you down. It 'ud save the county hangin' money." Laughing sardonically he pushed the girl through the heavy door and shut it behind him. The padlock was replaced.

WHEN they had gone Gage felt his face and wondered how they had managed to convince the girl of his guilt. But convince her they had and with Maida Ranz standing up before a jury and pointing him out as the killer, nothing could save him. Sulzer had played his cards well.

An hour later one of the cowhands came back to the stable with a lantern. Peeking through the wire opening, he saw Gage with his hands in back of him and unlocked the door. He set the lantern down and stooped over to place a plate of beans on the manure-strewn floor.

"Try eatin' like a dog," he suggested.

Gage moved slowly towards him. Suddenly his right hand whipped out from behind him and with all the power of his wide shoulders he drove his fist for the man's chin. It was a button shot, perfectly timed, beautifully executed. The cowhand's body arched backward and his body crashed against the boards. With eyes glazing he slid down to a sitting position, completely out, not even knowing what had hit him.

Gage worked fast. He trussed the waddy up thoroughly, rolled him under the manger in the thickest part

of the manure and palmed the man's six-gun. Blowing out the lantern, he closed and padlocked the heavy door, stole silently for the barn's big opening.

From the mess shack came the clatter of plates and men's voices, but one man stood on guard by the bunk house. Gage could see the red end of his cigarette butt, like a beacon in the night. Fearing if he tangled with this one, he might bring them all tumbling out of the mess shack, he kept to the shadows and stole to the front of the one story ranch house.

He had just reached the veranda and was about to try the front door when it swung in and Mamie stepped out. The light cut across his face, for a moment bringing it into bold relief. Until then he had not realized how much he looked like his father. The elder Gage to the day of his death had been redheaded without a touch of gray, his skin as smooth and free of wrinkles as in his youth.

The woman's eyes widened with shock and terror. Gage's hands flew out, gripped her tight, and stifled her outcry with his hand. He pulled her out of the banner of light and the door swung shut, leaving them in comparative darkness. She was still a handsome woman. He had noted that in the first view he had had of her. Her hair was still thick, tawny as a lion's mane. Her body was still firm and pliable in his grasp.

She did not resist. She clung to him, pressing her body against his, trying to whisper to him. When he took his hand from her mouth, she moaned, "Harry, darling! I thought you were dead. Abe said he had killed you. Where have you been?"

SHE did not seem to realize that time had not stopped. She was back in the arms of the man she had married. Through some miracle he had come back from the dead. Gage did not try to disillusion her. He wanted to get the truth of his father's death. She gave it to him unquestioningly.

"Abe ambushed you, Harry. He told me so. Then he beat in your head to make it look like an accident. He wanted the Slash 8. He promised to marry me. I was crazy about him. Don't hold it against me. Harry. Abe wouldn't marry me. I'm still your wife."

She clung to him, her face buried in his shoulder. He had an insane desire to seize her throat in his two hands, to strangle her until that handsome face with its full lips was blue and swollen.

A gun muzzle prodded his back and Sulzer's voice bit into him with sarcasm. "That ain't no way to greet your stepmother, Gage. Why don't you kiss her?"

Gage pushed the woman away from him and his lips turned stiff. "Abe's right, Mamie," he gritted. "You just made a mistake. Dad's dead and thank God I know who killed him."

The woman suddenly realized what a fool she had made of herself. Her eyes flamed with hot anger. This man who had held her in his arms was not Harry, her husband, this was his son, the lanky kid she had despised.

"You sneakin' son of a mongrel," she cried. "Blow his innards out Abe. Blow 'em out while you've got your guns in his back."

From the road came the steady chop-chop of a pony and the rancher chuckled. "Keep your shirt on, Mamie. The sheriff's comin'. Maida's goin' to accuse him of killin' her father. While we're at it we'll just make the knot tighter namin' him the murderer of his dad. The Slash 8'll then go to you all legal and proper—with no strings."

It took a moment for that to sink into the woman's head, but when it did she laughed with ghoulish glee. "That's rich, Abe. Doggoned if you don't think up the best jokes. I hated your old man, Hal, almost as much as I despised you. Now I'm really squaring matters for keeps. That will give me something to laugh about to my dying day."

Gage's shoulders sagged. Sulzer had not bothered to take the gun from his holster, probably had not realized that he had one, but it did no good with the rancher's muzzle in the small of his back. Nothing short

of a miracle could save him now and Sunset Gage was not the kind to believe in miracles.

THREE riders turned at the fork of the road and came steadily towards the house, drawing rein in front of it. The sheriff, a ponderous big man in a wide-brimmed Stetson slid from his horse and marched toward the group on the veranda. The door opened behind Mamie and Maida Ranz stood there, a slim silhouette with the white bandage circling her dark hair.

"This here is Hal Gage, Sheriff," Sulzer said. "We found him bending over Jed Ranz this afternoon by the creek. He'd bushwhacked him, then bashed in his head to make it look like an accident. Ain't that so, Maida?"

Maida came further out on the porch. With a sudden movement of her hand, she knocked the rancher's gun up, and sank her teeth in his wrist. Sulzer gave a howl of pain and dropped the weapon.

Gage pivoted on his toes and drew his own weapon, covering them all. "There's the killer of Jed Ranz, Sheriff," he grated, glaring at Sulzer, "and the murderer of my father. Mamie just admitted it to me a minute ago. Hoist your paws, Abe. Hoist 'em or I'll drill you."

"Sunset's right, Sheriff," Maida chimed in. "I heard Mamie confess."

Sulzer had heard enough. He knew he was trapped and like an animal at bay he tried to shield himself. With a sidewise leap, he got Mamie's body in front of him and his lips curled in a snarl. "Shoot," he screamed. "She'll go with me if you do."

THE sheriff stood like a man in a daze. The sudden action, the way they were all accusing each other had him running in circles. He did not know who to believe. Gage brought up his gun for a snap shot, then thought better of it. As much as he hated the tawny haired woman who had been his stepmother, he could not kill her. He dropped the gun and with a wrench, pulled Mamie from Sulzer's clutches.

The rancher kicked at him, trying to reach his groin. Gage drove a hard right to his face, followed it with a wicked left to the man's midriff. Sulzer folded up like a deflated balloon. Mamie subsided into a blubbering, moaning mass of womanhood on the floor of the veranda. Boots pounded around the corner of the house and Gage retrieved his gun.

"I'll kill the first waddy that reaches for his cutter," he barked.

"You don't remember me, Sheriff," he said, "but I'm Harry Gage's son. I came back to take possession of the Slash 8 and found Miss Maida holed up there. Sulzer's men took us prisoners and threatened to run us out of the county. He'd killed Jed Ranz this afternoon and bashed in his head to make it look like an accident."

"It's a lie," Mamie shouted, rushing at the girl.

Gage's high body blocked her way "You never liked me, Mamie, and the feeling was mutual. If you'll tell the sheriff the truth, I won't press charges against you. I wouldn't want to see the woman my dad loved and admired do a stretch in the pen."

She looked up at him, suddenly quiet, her glance searching his face. Tears welled into her eyes. I'm sorry, Hal. I'll tell the truth."

Maida rode the little mare that her father had ridden back to the Slash 8 with Gage to gather her belongings. Sunset Gage lit the lamp and looking at the big living room suddenly thought how lonesome it was going to be in this big house and he looked at the girl whose face was drawn, whose dark eyes were misty with unshed tears.

"You don't have to run away, ma'am," he said, softly. "I was sort of hopin'—maybe—you'd sort of stay and—"

She looked at him but volunteered no help and he floundered on with, "What I mean is—there's a preacher in town. We could sort of ride in—and maybe—get hitched legal. I'd sure be mighty proud to have you ramroddin' the Slash 8, and—me."

"Sunset," she said, moving towards him with shining eyes. "That sounds like a proposal. Do we have to wait until morning?"

THE END

A DRIFT FENCE MEANS DEATH

"Rake in your chips, fella," muttered the beaten Dude Chaver. "But I'm dealin' another hand dang soon, an' I don't think you'll win that pot." And when Aug Clark found his drift fence cut, and his mares run off, he knew what Chaver had meant!

AUG CLARK was in the harness-shop, buying a new latigo strap, when Ann O'Keefe rode into town. Old Hank O'Keefe's daughter rode a bay and white pinto, but Aug Clark wasn't looking at the horse. He had seen beautiful women before, but this girl was more than beautiful. The stoop-shouldered old clerk followed Aug's gaze through the store window.

"She's dynamite and fire, boy," he chuckled. "An' on top of that, she's got ol' Hank's spitfire temper."

Aug grinned and paid for the latigo strap. Aug was redheaded and he smiled easily. When he went out the door Ann O'Keefe had already dismounted. The pinto was pawing and rearing, pulling back against his reins, and Ann's temper got the best of her. She lashed him over the head with her quirt.

A sudden anger ran through Aug Clark. He was a horseman—he'd been raised in a saddle—and he knew the worst thing you could do was beat a bronc over the head. Evidently the pinto thought so, too, for he settled down, his playfulness gone; Ann started to tie him to the hitchrack.

Suddenly the pinto tossed up his head, pushing the girl backwards. She sprawled back against Aug Clark, who caught her before she fell. But she paid no attention to Aug, for now, her anger thoroughly aroused, she raised her shot-loaded quirt again, intending to whip the pinto across the head.

Her arm rose—then held upright. She tried to jerk it down, but Aug's grip was too strong. Aug's steady voice sounded in her ears.

"Go easy with that quirt, ma'am. That pony ain't mean, he's jus' playin' aroun'. That quirt-lash might hit him jus' right an' knock out one of his eyes."

The girl turned on him. Anger colored her smooth skin, making her face still more beautiful. Her dark eyes were sparkling.

"Let go of my arm, mister!"

Aug smiled and said, "No can do, Miss Ann."

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"I reckon you oughta know me," said Aug quietly. "I was ridin' over on Willow crick the other day an' our trails crossed. But if you wanta know more, Miss O'Keefe, I'm the fella that bought the ol' Higgins' place on the Big Warm."

"You—you nester—!"

Anger ran through Aug, but he managed to hold it. He wanted to shake her good, and then paddle her. There was plenty of old Hank O'Keefe in this girl, and Aug had felt like shaking old Hank a time or two in the three months Aug had been in this Wyoming section.

"I'm no sodbuster," he corrected. "I'm a horse-raiser, miss. Jus' 'cause I'm startin' a horse outfit—"

Aug's smile grew. He liked the feel of that well-formed arm. "I'll let go if you quit beatin' that pinto."

Ann O'Keefe's anger was gone,

By Cliff Campbell

"Are you accusin' me of cuttin' yer fence, Clark?"

now. She knew that people were standing on the street watching them. She also knew that her temper had gotten her into an embarrassing situation. She, an O'Keefe, was the center of staring eyes. She wondered if she could back down gracefully and let this smiling redhead win the issue at hand. Aug felt her arm tremble.

"You win," she said huskily.

Aug dropped her arm. Suddenly a voice from behind Aug said sternly, "This man molestin' you, Miss O'Keefe?"

Aug turned. A heavy-set man wearing a blue suit stood there, his dark face small and hard in the brittle sunlight. Aug knew him as Dude Chaver, a sleek, well-groomed gent who always hung around town, and who always had plenty of money. He ran a small cow-outfit back in the hardscrabble hills and Aug, in the short period he had been on this range, had many times wondered how Dude Chaver made such an outfit pay.

"You ain't got no hand in this, Chaver," said Aug steelily.

DUDE CHAVER'S eyes were dangerous. "I wasn't talkin' to you, you bum. When I talk to you, then it's time to answer. I asked you a question, Miss Ann."

There was fear in the girl's eyes now, the anger was gone. Aug knew what was bothering her. Her temper had run away with her and now, be-

cause of it, two men were on the verge of fighting. And the hot blood that coursed in her veins demanded action. Her quirt lashed out.

The buckskin thongs caught Dude Chaver across his smooth-shaven jaw. Anger and pain surged through the man's beady eyes.

"I can take care of my own affairs, Dude Chaver." The girl's tone was metallic. Her eyes blazed into Aug's. "And as for you, nester, keep out of my affairs, too." She swung up on her pinto and rode out of town at a fast lope.

Aug turned to leave but Dude Chaver's hand grabbed his shoulder. The man pulled Aug around, his face heavy with anger. He clipped his words.

"Get outa my sight, fella!"

Aug studied him momentarily. He understood. Ann O'Keefe had made a fool out of Dude Chaver, had humiliated him before the staring townspeople, and now Chaver's ego demanded he acquit himself with some grace. He could do this by picking trouble with Aug Clark.

"You the town marshal?"

"No—"

"Then don't order me aroun', you tinhorn!"

Dude Chaver carried two guns, low-tied guns, but he did not use them. Instead, he stepped forward, his left fist lashing out. Aug tried to duck the unexpected blow but he was too slow. Chaver's knuckles smashed against the side of Aug's head.

The blow was a glancing one; despite that it made Aug's head whirl. Aug stepped in, his fists working. He spotted Chaver about fifteen pounds and a few inches of reach. So he went inside the man's long arms.

He carried the fight in close. His head pulled low, he sent his fists in, working on Chaver's midsection. The ferocity of his attack made Chaver step back. Elation pumped through Aug.

Chaver's right crashed against Aug's left ribs. The sickening blow to the heart threatened to buckle his knees, but he whipped up his failing strength and dug in. He bulled Chaver back against the Ace saloon and dropped the big man with a right to the jaw.

Chaver hit the plank sidewalk. He rolled to one side, his hand going for his gun. But that hand stopped when Chaver's eyes stared up into the black bores of Aug Clark's two .45s.

"Don't pull those guns, Chaver."

Chaver's tongue came out and wet his swollen lips. He lay like that for a long moment and then braced his hands under him and got to his feet. But Aug knew the man's fight was not gone. The trouble had just started and there was only one way it would end. It would end in gunsmoke.

"Rake in your chips," said Chaver huskily. "But I'm dealin' another hand dang soon an' I don't think you'll win that pot, Clark."

Aug grinned. "Mebbe not," he agreed.

When Aug Clark reached the high hills beyond town, he saw a cloud of dust below him, some three miles away. Ann O'Keefe was heading for her father's Circle Z spread, set back against the Mission hills. And Ann O'Keefe, despite the hot afternoon, was not sparing her pinto.

Aug pulled his bronc in and rolled a brown-paper cigaret, a smile touching his lips. His left eye was almost swollen shut and his jaw felt like he'd been kicked by a bull. Damn, that girl had spunk! Pretty as a three-year-old filly and full of fight.

SOBER reality wiped the smile from his face. He had made a deadly enemy of Dude Chaver and old Hank O'Keefe, when he heard about how he had treated his daughter, might buckle on his guns and ride out after Aug. Aug had met old Hank a few times down in town. Hank O'Keefe was a cowman of the old school—gruff, hearty, and headstrong.

But he did not know that Ann, when she reached the Circle Z, had turned the pinto loose, petting him and stroking his ears. For remorse filled the girl; her temper had gotten the better of her, and now she was

sorry. Old Hank was sitting on the long porch in his rocking-chair.

"You sure never stayed long in town," he said gruffly.

She evaded the question. "And you never stayed long at the South creek roundup camp, either, Dad. I thought you intended to stay there a few days."

Old Hank spat tobacco-juice at a fly on the porch railing. He missed and that added no sweetness to his anger-laden voice.

"Ain't but danged few head of cattle over on South crick, girl."

Ann stared at him. "You mean—?"

"Just what you're thinkin'. Somebody's rustlin' Circle Z stock. Too many nesters movin' in—like that fella down on the Big Warm."

"What fellow?"

"This gent that calls hisself Aug Clark."

"But he's a horse-rancher, not a cattleman."

"That's what he says," growled old Hank. "Sure, he's runnin' a few head of mangy cayuses down there—"

"They're not *cayuses,*" corrected Ann testily. "I've seen Mr. Clark's horses. They are good-bred, long-legged horses with just enough range blood in them to give them a good bottom. Mr. Clark—"

Old Hank was so surprised he got out of his chair. "Since when did you start callin' a nester *mister?*" he demanded. "Why, dang my buttons, you never called a man *mister* in your life—not even your own father—" He stared at his daughter. "Say, you ain't takin' up hobnobbin' aroun' with that fella, are you? 'Cause if'n you do I'm goin'—"

"You aren't going to do anything," corrected his daughter angrily. "But Mr. Clark is a gentleman and I don't like to hear you call him a thief!"

She turned sharply, and entered the house. Old Hank stared at her. "Now what in the name of hades," he wondered aloud, "has got into her?" But it wouldn't have done him any good to even ask Ann that. She didn't know herself.

Next forenoon Aug was branding some colts when Ann O'Keefe rode off the rimrock and came up to the corral. Aug finished putting the brand on a young bay and untied him. He put his iron in the branding fire and banked it with hot coals before climbing to the top corral-pole.

"Howdy, Miss Ann. You come over to finish what you started down in town yesterday?"

Ann looked at him teasingly. "You want me to?"

Aug pushed back his Stetson and grinned. "Reckon not, miss. I never was no hand at fightin' a woman."

The ice was broken. The girl laughed throatily. "Believe it or not, I came over to apologize, Mr. Clark."

"Mister Clark," said Aug. "Whew, nobody's called me that since the banker down town sold me this place. The name's Aug. Augustine's the full name. Now ain't that an awful handle for a man as homely as me to pack around?"

ANN'S voice was serious. "You made a strong enemy in Dude Chaver, Aug; it was all my fault and I am sorry."

"I ain't one to run," said Aug.

"I just thought I'd tell you." She turned her horse to go, then drew rein again. "Yesterday Dad came in from our roundup crew over on South creek and he says we've lost quite a few cattle over there this summer."

Hank understood. "An' he thinks perhaps—"

"Dad's a dyed-in-the-wool ol' cowman. He swears the nesters might have been butchering them."

"An' he sorta considers me in with the sodbusters?"

Ann dodged that question. "Just thought I'd tell you." She turned and loped away. Aug watched her leave, his blood quickening. He wondered if she had told her father about the run-in they had had down in town.

A silent anger ran through him. So old Hank considered him as a *nester,* huh? Well, the old gent'd better get that off'n his mind. Aug also had no use for the farmers. They plowed up good range country and the wind

blowed it away. That made him mad—old Hank calling him a farmer.

But still, a frown grooved Aug's forehead. Right after he had bought his little spread he had run a drift-fence east and west from the foot of Cheyenne creek to Eagle nest butte. He had built the fence to keep his mares from mixing in with old Hank's horses. His mares were well-bred and old Hank ran a few cayuse stallions and he didn't want any of his mares throwing a cayuse colt.

Twice in the last two months Aug had found that drift-fence cut. Once he had patched it up before any of old Hank's studs could get in with his mares. The other time he had cut a runty stallion back, ridden up to the Circle Z and told old Hank about the cut fence. The oldster had boiled over with anger.

"Neither me nor any of my hands cut your danged fence, Clark."

"I'm not accusin' you," Aug had said. "Jus' thought you'd like to know, O'Keefe. But I would like to know who cut that fence."

Old Hank would have liked to have known, too. That night, after his riders were in the bunk-house, he had questioned them regarding it. And none of them, according to their statements, had cut the fence.

Who had?

That afternoon, Aug rode the drift-fence but failed to find it cut again. The taut wires glistened under the slanting sun like polished strings of blue. He wondered idly if he hadn't stretched the wires too tight; come a cold snap and those wires would contract a lot.

A rider came down from the north, and as he rode closer Aug recognized him as Dude Chaver. Aug pulled up, his hands on his guns. Sullenness showed on Dude Chaver's battered face.

"Kinda off'n your home range, ain't you?" asked Aug sarcastically.

"This is gover'ment land," growled Dude Chaver. "That means anybody's got a right to ride across it. How come you run a drift-fence across gover'ment land?"

"I got a permit."

Dude Chaver's dark eyes hardened. "You know all the answers, huh?" A sardonic smile tugged at his puffed lips. Then he turned his horse and rode away. Aug watched him until he was out of sight in the cut-coulees.

Now what was Dude Chaver doing on this range? That thought tumbled through Aug's brain and demanded an answer, but the horseman found no solution to the question. Chaver's range was some distance away and the dudish man had no reason to put a horse across this section.

Aug sent his bay down into a creek bottom. Here he had a herd of his mares. There were about thirty of the horses—clean-limbed, well-bred stock, some with foals, others ready to foal in a few months. Pride welled through Aug as he watched the grazing horses.

Five years before he had been breaking broncs for a Colorado cow-outfit, and he had been a good bronc-stomper. When the other hands had drifted into town to spend their hard-earned *dinero* over green-topped tables and across bars, Aug had saved his money. These horses were the results of his savings; he had sweated and labored long and hard for this bunch.

DARKNESS was settling across the northern ranges when he loped into his home-camp. He warmed some beans and punched a butcher-knife into a loaf of bread he had baked himself. The meal was flat and tasteless. Grudgingly, he washed his dishes, and pulled off his boots.

But he found no rest on his hard bunk; thoughts ran through him tantalizingly. Somehow they centered around the figure of Dude Chaver. He pushed them off Chaver and thought of Ann O'Keefe. Now there was a girl for a man. But still, Dude Chaver kept bobbing up, demanding attention in his mental wanderings. Why was Chaver riding that drift-fence?

Disgruntled, he sat up, pulled on his boots, and went outside. The moon was rising, coloring the hills with golden light. Coyotes were howling in the distance. He saddled

a big black gelding and hit across the hills, riding the drift-fence.

He dismounted a number of times, and pushed down on the wires. But they were taut and resisted his weight. That meant that they were still stretched rigidly. He grinned to himself and told himself he was on a fool's errand.

Midnight found him high in the rough country at a spot not distant from his herd of mares. He drew rein in a dark clump of chokecherry bushes and listened to the coyotes howl. Two of them were keeping up an insistent screeching. Evidently they were mates. One was situated in the hills south of him and the other was located somewhere north of the drift-fence.

Aug listened to them idly. Time dragged by and he was at the point of returning home when the coyote to the south ceased howling. His mate howled a number of times, but got no response.

Aug frowned. Evidently something—or somebody—had disturbed the one coyote, and he was drifting out of that section. Now what—or who—would be moving in this desolate country at this hour of the night?

He put his ear to the earth, but heard nothing. Suddenly he heard the sound of moving stock somewhere in the distance. He could not tell whether the stock consisted of cattle or horses because the sound was too far away.

He went to the fence and put his hand on the top wire. It was taut. But before he could remove his hand the wire sagged slightly. Quickly he dropped his hand to the second wire; it, too, was sagging.

Somebody was cutting the wires!

Leaving his bronc hidden, Aug crept to the edge of the cliff. Below him, shadowy forms in the darkness, moved a small herd of cattle. Four riders tailed the critters. And, despite the shadows, Aug recognized one of the riders as Dude Chaver.

The herd was pointed toward the north. Aug felt anger run through him. Then another thought came: why was Dude Chaver herding cattle through this country at night? Aug studied the herd carefully.

The cattle spilled out of the canyon then and Aug recognized a brockle-faced steer as one he had seen on old Hank's Circle Z range. He stared, wondering if he were wrong. No, he would know that off-colored steer any place.

Now he knew where old Hank's cattle were going. And he knew why Dude Chaver, despite his hardscrabble ranch, always had plenty of money. Chaver and his men were rustling Circle Z cattle and hazing them north into Montana to sell them. The state border was just about fifteen miles north.

Mingled emotions tugged at him. He held no brief for old Hank, but Chaver had cut his drift-fence. Aug studied the situation carefully. He couldn't ride down and challenge Chaver and his three men — that would be suicide. He would just have to trail along and await a break.

He saw two of the riders cut off into a side gully. A few minutes later they came back hazing some horses ahead of them. They pushed the horses in ahead of the cattle and drove them north.

Aug's blood was cold. Dude Chaver was stealing his herd of mares! His heart beating heavily, he heard Dude Chaver's voice below him.

"I'll teach that tinhorn he can't cross me! By the time he wakes up in the mornin' his broncs'll be miles away headin' for sale!"

And Chaver, he knew, was right. Once across the line, Chaver would dispose of the mares through illegitimate channels. And Aug, had he not seen them run off, would never have known where they had gone. That put things in a different light. Now more than cutting the drift-fence entered the picture—Dude Chaver was stealing his mares.

AUG swung in behind the herd. Carefully, he kept his distance, riding the high ridges, keeping hidden from Chaver and his men. He realized he would have to play a waiting game. Catch the longloopers

off-guard and throw a gun down on them.

For ten miles he trailed them, his thoughts bitter. He was riding through a canyon when he heard the horseman behind him. He ground-tied his bronc in some brush, hit the sod and ran back down-trail, his guns drawn. His first thought was that perhaps a Chaver man had dropped unnoticed behind the herd in order to check Chaver's back-trail. But he was wrong.

The rider came around a slant, and Aug saw the horseman clearly. He lowered his guns and stepped into the trail, his right hand raised. The horseman drew rein, and he caught the glitter of moonlight on a drawn gun.

"Aug!"

"Holy smoke! What're you doin' here, Ann?"

Ann O'Keefe's face showed relief. "Oh, am I glad to see you, Aug. Are you trailing those—those —thieves, too?"

Aug nodded. "An' you?"

"Grandma Hakeron is sick. I—I was over to see her and when I was riding home I saw these thieves. I decided to trail them to see where they took the cattle. Dude Chaver is one of them, isn't he?"

"Yes." Aug's voice was brittle. "But you go home; this ain't no place for you. Bring ol' Hank—"

"What are you goin' to do?"

"I'm followin' 'em."

Her voice was stubborn. "Then I am, too."

"Lissen," pleaded Aug. "Your ol' man is out after my hide. You can't stay with me. He'll—he'll kill me, I tell you!"

"But I'm going!"

Aug studied her, and liked what he saw. Stubborn as a setting-hen, he thought. Only way to turn her back was to tie her up. Evidently she sensed his thoughts for her gun-barrel steadied rock-hard.

"Okay," said Aug grudgingly. "But be careful."

They continued behind the rustlers. Now and then they stopped and went ahead on foot, fearing a trap was set ahead, but their fears turned out to be groundless; Chaver and his riders kept pushing the herd of cattle and horses hard. False dawn found them miles across the state line.

Now the hills were petering out. A grassy flat stretched ahead in the canyons. Aug and Ann took no chances. They left their broncs and walked ahead, hiding in the brush as they advanced.

And well they did, for here Chaver started the herd milling. The cattle and horses were tired and soon settled down to grazing. Aug saw a log shack set against a steep, rock-covered hill. The shack looked old and dilapidated. The voices of the men came to him clearly.

"We've gone far enough tonight, men. Me an' Shorty an' Jeb'll bed down an' catch some sleep. Harton, you walk along the canyon. Get a spot where you are hidden an' guard our back-trail."

"Ain't no use doin' that, Dude."

"You go back there an' keep your eyes peeled. I'm runnin' this outfit. Now make tracks."

Another man asked, "Figure this herd'll stray, Dude?"

"Them broncs an' dogies are too tired, Jeb. An' Harton can keep his eye on them. Now keep your eyes open, Harton."

"I got *some* brains, Dude."

Harton rode down the canyon toward Ann and Aug. Dude Chaver and his remaining two riders picketed their broncs to graze. Aug noticed they did not unsaddle them. They wanted them saddled for any emergency. Chaver and his two men entered the cabin.

"You stay here," Aug told Ann, "an' cover Harton."

"Okay."

Ann's tone sounded light, but Aug knew she was trembling. Aug ripped the catchrope from his saddle. Hidden, he built a loop in the trail, spilling the manila out in a wide circle. Now Harton rounded the corner. Aug settled back, his bootheels anchored against a boulder, and waited.

HARTON'S bronc came closer. He galloped by Ann. Now he

was abreast Aug. His bronc's forefeet landed inside the loop. Aug snapped it closed around the bronc's front ankles, and pulled hard.

The horse hit the end of the rope and flopped, throwing Harton to the ground. The man grunted in surprise, then said no more. That was because Aug, running hurriedly forward, had slapped him behind the ear with his gun-barrel. Harton's horse scrambled to his feet. Ann darted out and held the animal by the reins.

Working quickly, Aug gagged Harton with the man's neckscarf. Then, using the rope on Harton's saddle, he bound the man hand and foot. Sweating, he straightened, and listened, fearing that Chaver had heard the conflict.

But, save for the cattle and horses grazing in the clearing, the night was quiet. Already Ann had tied Harton's horse back in the buckbrush. She laid her hand on Aug's arm.

"What'll we do next, Aug?"

Aug scratched his head. "If we had any sense one of us would high-tail back an' get your ol' man an' some of his riders."

"By the time we got there, though, these men might have pulled out."

"That's right," considered Aug.

For some time he stood there and studied the log house. From what he could see the shack looked as though the logs had almost rotted through. He lifted his gaze from the house to the hilly slope above it. The gully-wall had a pretty steep pitch right above the house.

That gave him an idea. "We got to get them outa the house," he told Ann. "Then we can throw down on them."

"But how'll we get them out?"

Aug felt of the grass. "We could maybe start a fire back of the house and burn them out."

"But the grass is too wet."

Aug nodded. "Must be some way." Again he scrutinized the hill behind the cabin. An idea sprouted in his mind, lingered, then grew into bloom. "I got it."

Quickly he outlined his plan to the girl. Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a silent O. "I'm helping you, Aug."

"But Ann—"

"I'm helping you!"

Aug shrugged. "Okay. It's your neck."

Sneaking through the brush, they circled the cabin. Once they were within a few feet of it and they crouched and listened. Muffled snores came to their ears and Aug smiled tightly.

"They're all asleep, Ann."

Moving as silently as possible, they climbed the cliff. Each carried a catch-rope. Once Ann slipped on a rock and the rock rumbled downward through the brush. They flattened against the hill and listened.

But the Chaver men had not heard the noise. There was a huge boulder right above the cabin. Aug leaned his weight against it. Despite its size, the rock was balanced somewhat on a flat stony surface. Aug could teeter it slightly back and forth.

Every time he inched the rock forward, Ann put smaller rocks under it. The work was slow, tedious. Sweat broke out on Aug's forehead. Inch by inch they put the balance of

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AUGUST ISSUE
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the rock toward the front. Finally, after an hour, all it needed was a hard shove to send it toppling and rolling down on the cabin. Aug mopped his forehead.

"Hand me a catchrope."

The rock tapered to a point. Aug tied a catchrope around its apex. Then he went downslope, laying the rope behind him. He ran it around a stunted pine-tree and tied Ann's rope to it. When he got to the end of the rope he was even with the cabin.

They squatted there and studied the rock. Now, if things worked right, all the rock needed was a pull on the rope to send it toppling into the cabin. Dawn was coming in bright now. Aug listened closely.

ONLY the muted sound of snoring men in the cabin met his ears. He glanced at the girl, wishing she were not with him, but her eyes were defiant. Aug grinned and pulled on the rope.

The slack came up slowly. Then the weight of the rock, some sixty feet away, was felt on the manila. His heart pounding steadily, Aug braced his feet and pulled. But the rock held firmly.

"I'll help you," whispered Ann.

She grabbed hold of the rope. Her slender body, pressing back against Aug's, made a strange happiness surge through him. The slack came up and for a moment the rock held. Then, suddenly, the rope became so slack they both almost fell.

Aug thought, at first, that the rope had slipped from the boulder. But when he looked up the rock was sliding downward. Slowly, at first, it came; then it gathered momentum until, a ton smashing through brush, it rolled hard into the cabin.

Logs splintered and crashed. The entire upper wall of the cabin broke under the impact. The roof crashed in.

Aug grinned as he heard men hollering inside. He stepped into the clearing, his guns out. Now the rock had smashed through the cabin and rolled out in front of him. He leaped around it, his guns rigid.

Chaver and one of his men broke from the ruined cabin. Aug's voice halted them in their tracks.

"Up with your hands, men!"

They halted, their eyes wide, and stared at him. There was a moment of hesitation shattered only by the sound of the rock lumbering on down the slope. Then the boulder, after it hit the clearing stopped.

"Keep your eye on the cabin, Ann," clipped Aug. "There's another one in there."

Chaver finally found his voice. "Dang, if it ain't the sodbuster, Jeb." He studied Aug coldly. "An' ol' Hank's filly, too. What'd you aim to do?"

"Take you back to jail," growled Aug. "We trailed you, Dude. You've rustled your last cow."

Dude Chaver's eyes were stony. Suddenly, without warning, he was drawing his guns. The man was fast, too fast—his bullet plowed harmlessly into the gravel at Aug's boots as Aug's bullet pounded into his chest.

Chaver grunted, dropped his gun, and folded over it. Quickly, Aug swung his .45 on Jeb, but the outlaw had seen enough. His hands were above his head and he was screeching:

"Don't shoot, fella, don't shoot!"

Ann jerked Jeb's guns from leather. Then, while she held the man under her weapon, Aug poked his head into the wrecked cabin. The scene meeting his eyes was not pleasant. The third Chaver man was dead. The boulder had rolled directly over him.

Twenty minutes later, with the two prisoners tied to their saddle-horns, with the two dead men sprawled across their kaks, Ann and Aug rode toward home, driving the stolen herd.

"Your ol' man'll be mad at me," said Aug. "Takin' you out on a night ride like this. . ."

"He won't be mad, Aug."

Aug looked at her. The dawn colored her cheeks and made her eyes sparkle more than ever. Her eyes carrid a hint, and a promise. Aug found himself stammering.

"An' why won't he be mad?"

"I won't let him," said Ann.

HELL POPS AT ANGEL'S ★ ★ ★ ROOST ★ ★ ★

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

(author of "Job for a Lawman")

THEY called themselves the "Bearcat Four," and their slogan was, "Our Music Gets You." Four cowpoke musicians, with an aged mule and a wagon, a bunch of instruments, and a burning ambition to make good.

Right now, all four would have settled for one square meal apiece.

Ben Sunter, the driver, laid aside his violin long enough to slap the mule's rump with the reins. He spat, tucked the instrument back under his chin and commenced sawing.

"Try that last bar of 'Turkey in the Straw' again, fellers," he called to the trio bouncing around in the wagon. "This time, with more feeling."

Ollie Addison, the curly-haired accordionist, compressed his bellows with a sigh. "The only feeling I get now," he said wryly, "is one of emptiness. My belly's playin' tag with my backbone. Why in the hell did I ever leave the Pothook H?"

The old bald-headed fellow, Pop Gumbert, hunched over his plunking guitar like an overgrown frog, snorted.

"If you gents," he reminded, "had of listened to reason in that last town we played in, we'd of been there yet. Poker an' business never did mix."

He plucked disgustedly at the strings.

A sour note floated over from the jiggling piano. The Bearcat Four boasted a portable piano and a unique pianist. "B-Flat Pete" Soames was the brand the good-looking little fellow went by, and he had the distinction of being the only piano player in the country who played the piano backwards. That is, B-Flat Pete played the air with his left hand, the bass wtih his right. All of which seems screwy, but somehow it sounded okay when they got together.

B-Flat Pete, going on eighteen years, played in one key only—you guessed it—B-Flat. When he made mistakes, and they were plenty, he claimed it must be on account of his hands were too small to make the reaches good. B-Flat's hands were unusually small and graceful, as was the rest of him.

The little pianist executed a tricky run on the ivories.

"What Pop means," he said, "is you shoulda listened to me. I was the one who told you to watch that king, Ben. Remember?"

Ben Sunter gave the plodding mule another lick. "Hogwash. I was

---

B-Flat Pete's hot stuff on the piano, but we all figure that he ain't good for nothin' else, until he pops up with this super-slick plan to snag the holdup gang that's makin' hell pop in Angel's Roost!

just onlucky. Better tend to your knittin', kid, and watch them sour notes. Got more wild ideas than a dog has fleas."

"Yeah," said Ollie Addison, "tend yore knittin', and leave the thinkin' to us grownups."

B-Flat Pete just grinned and hit another off-note. He had his ideas and nobody was going to squelch them.

They stopped playing as the wagon swung about the bend in the road and a sign reading "ANGEL'S ROOST—POP. 1000" sprang up. A good-sized town followed. There were false-fronted buildings, with numerous gents lounging around on the various porches. A couple of wide-sombreroed Mexes on mangy burros rode up to a hitchrack, dismounted. They went up the steps of the large building with the sign, "ROTGUT-FREE SALOON AND DANCE-HALL."

From inside, came the click of poker chips, the excited squeals of women. Somewhere inside, too, a gun went off. The lower right-hand pane of the front window shattered.

BEN SUNTER'S big hand tightened on the reins.

"Something tells me to drive on," he said. "Eats or no eats." He made as if to slap the mule's bony rump.

Little B-Flat Pete Soames left his piano, stepped forward. "Let's give it a try. I got a hunch we'll make money in this joint."

Ollie Anderson put his accordion down where it wasn't in danger of being shot at. "I dunno. I'm empty as a rainbarrel in the desert and drier'n a cedar chip, but—"

He was looking at the tough faces on the men on the porches, the way their hands swung near their holsters. Many wore more than one gun, and some had a suggestive bulge in their shirt fronts.

Pop Gumbert's eyes were on the swinging doors. He licked his dry lips, gulped.

"A cool, wet glass o' redeye tricklin' down yore throat, beef an' potatoes, an' watermelon to follow up—Man! That's medicine not hard to take."

"We can give 'er a fling," B-Flat Pete urged. "What have we got to lose?"

It was pretty strong argument. Ollie and Pop gave in, and that made the vote three to one. Still shaking his head, Ben Sunter followed the rest up to the saloon.

They collided with a flint-faced man who came out the doors suddenly. He was flashily dressed in a high silk hat, a red vest, and a swallow-tailed coat. Ben Sunter let out a bellow as the other's big foot ground on his toe.

The big stranger scowled.

"Keep your hoofs outta my way," he said. He blew a smarting smoke cloud into Ben Sunter's face.

The violinist surged forward, with balled fist. Had the fist ever landed, the stranger would have measured his length on the porch. B-Flat Pete grabbed Sunter's arm in time. "Wait, Ben! Take it easy. Remember, your livin' depends on keepin' those fingers fit."

"I oughta smash his tomato puss with my fiddle," Ben roared. He surged ahead again, but by now Ollie and Pop were helping to hold him.

The gaudily garbed man's frown was melting. "Did I hear you say fiddle?" he said. "I need a fiddle-player, a whole damn orchestra.. My own up and left me a week ago. Business slackin' considerable. You care to—"

Ben Sunter's jaw protruded.

"I wouldn't work for you if you was gold-plated," he began, but little B-Flat Pete Soames edged in between them. "We're lookin' for work," B-Flat said quickly. "Got a squeezebox, guitar and piano besides. Any wage is agreeable, providin' the meals are throwed in. When do we start?"

Sunter tried to smother B-Flat's mouth with his paw, failed. The flashy gent, who proved to be Todd Ferret, owner of the Rotgut-Free, gave an enthusiastic grunt. "By hell! That's the way I like to swing a deal! Welcome to Angel's Roost, men. You're hired! Tote your stuff

in and get settled. Over there in the far corner by them potted cactus plants."

Old Pop Gumbert was scratching his chin. "What," he demanded, "made them other gents leave so suddenlike?"

Todd Ferret removed his smelly cigar. He gave a nervous little laugh. "They didn't like the holdups," he said, shifting his gaze. "But the sheriff's took care of that. Come on, come on. Get that music started."

Ben Sunter was growling as they sweated up the steps with the piano. He growled louder when he saw the bullet holes, the chipped keys of the decrepit piano which belonged to the saloon.

"We," the violinist spat, as they rolled their own upright into place, "Are a pack of fools. Damn fools. No good'll come of this tie-up, mark my words. I don't cotton to that Ferret duck a-tall."

And as time went by, it seemed his dislike had grounds. Ben had a long talk with the town sheriff, Merle Dane, and the latter revealed that he had been trying to get the goods on Todd Ferret for months. Ferret, according to the lawman, was a crook, a thief, a snake which ought to be tromped on before his venom did in the whole town.

"FERRET," Dane told Ben, "is the one behind those holdups. He must have a gang workin' for him. I haven't been able to get a damn thing on him—yet. But he's got to be stopped. Those holdups and killings have got to be stopped. I'm offerin' a cool ten grand to the man or men who do that. Sorry, Sunter, but I thought you ought to know the kind of a guy you've signed up for. If you see anything funny around the saloon, let me know. This town's got to be made safe for honest folks to live in."

The holdups, it seemed, were getting to be a habit in Angel's Roost. The town bank, the Cattlemen's Trust Company, together with several stores, and the Rotgut-Free Saloon itself, had been gutted. The bandits, masked, would ride boldly into town,

(Continued On Page 72)

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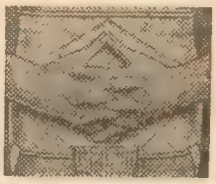

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(Continued From Page 71)

pull their steal and clear out. It was that simple, but they fiendishly chose the very nights the sheriff and posse were out trying to locate them and their hideout. They picked these nights to strip the town bare.

Six men, prominent citizens, had been killed in these raids. One hundred thousand dollars in cash and gold stolen.

B-Flat Pete Soames argued in vain in Todd Ferret's behalf. "Them holdups here in Todd's own saloon," he said, "ought to exonerate him. He wouldn't rob his own joint. Can't you birds see that?"

"I can see," Ben Sunter said bitterly, "that Todd Ferret is a skunk. Don't your brains ever work right, B-Flat? Ferret pulled holdups in his own place to shunt off suspicion. Since him an' his men was doin' the robbin', he couldn't lose no money. The rest of you think what you like. Me, I'm keepin' an eye on Ferret. That ten grand offer of Dane's ain't hay."

Ollie Anderson agreed on that. So also, did old Pop, but B-Flat Pete Soames stuck by his guns. He just couldn't believe that Todd Ferret would rob his own saloon, and thus endanger the lives of those patronizing it.

Thursday night came. It started out mild. Ben, B-Flat and the boys tore off "Wait for the Wagon" over by the potted cactus plants. Cowpokes, miners, and others danced with the percentage girls, and the gambling tables groaned with chips, whiskey glasses, and fat money belts. B-Flat Pete achieved a full octave reach without mishap, and everybody seemed happy.

Then the swinging doors opened and a knot of masked hombres burst in.

B-Flat Pete moved to leave his stool. He froze as a bullet chewed into his shirt sleeve, finally burying itself in the keyboard. Ollie Addison cursed at the slug sieving the bellows of his accordion. Only one small hole in the pleats, but it was a knife stab in Ollie's heart.

"By hell!" Ollie yelled. "You can't do that to me!"

But they were doing it, and getting away with it. Like an irresistible flood, the bandit pack flowed across the floor, men and women shrinking before it. At the poker tables, they congregated, and pawed up every bit of money in sight.

"You gents," the masked leader announced in muffled tones, "make one funny move and it'll be your last."

Ben Sunter was staring at the cloaked hulk before him. This gent with the flowing robe, mask, and gun in hand, matched the size and shape of the saloon owner, Ferret. He had a swaying, slithery walk, too, like Todd Ferret. And Ferret wasn't anywhere in sight just now. Ben Sunter's hand tightened on the neck of his violin.

"Someday," he predicted, "the law is going to catch up with you, fella. When it does, it's gonna slam down on you like a ton of rock."

The masked gunman laughed. He flourished the gun. "It won't catch up, if it depends on Sheriff Dane. That yellow-bellied lawdog is afraid of his shadow." He gave a pleased grunt. "Dane's out now, smelling down a false lead. Poor fool."

B-Flat Pete Soames was working his slender fingers over the keyboard. "I notice you never pick the nights Todd Ferret's here. You afraid of him, Mr. Gunny?"

THE bandit leader's frame shook with laughter.

"Ferret not here, lawdog Dane absent. Put two and two together, half-pint. They're all too yellow to face me. I can come and go here any time I please. But enough of this gab. Let's go men, and plug the first who tries a break."

The gunmen faded from the room.

Ben Sunter stepped forward. He picked something from the floor. "Boys," he said in a strained voice, "Take a look at this."

Ollie Addison, B-Flat Pete, and Pop crowded about him. Above the hum of excited patrons, you could hear Pop Gumbert's shrill whistle of surprise.

"Glory be t' goshen. It's Todd's!"

(Continued On Page 74)

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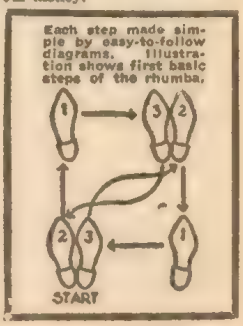

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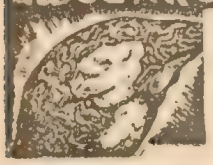

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(Continued Pram Page 73)

In Sunter's big mitt rested the lucky piece that Todd Ferret always kept on his watch chain. The bronze coin, with cleverly fashioned steer head and crossed six-guns embossed on its surface. Ferret never let anyone take that coin. He held a superstitious belief in its powers to bring him luck.

"That," Ben Sunter said triumphantly, "ought to convince you birds I know what's what. That there coin dropped plumb from the masked gent's robe. It proves what I've thought right along. Todd Ferret's stagin' these holdups."

The three of them looked at B-Flat Pete Soames. B-Flat Pete's fingers continued their idle wandering over the keys.

"Don't prove nothin'," he said quietly. "My shirt may be at the laundry, but that don't say I'm there. I still think Todd is innocent."

He turned suddenly on the swivel stool, faced them. "You fellas listen to me, just this once. I got a little plan I figure might trap that gunny; it's worth the try, at least. Then we can settle the thing for good."

He explained how Todd Ferret had recently hired a new dancer, a fiery Mexican girl, who he figured would pack in the customers. She had a style that laid them on the floor and had their tongues out panting, B-Flat Pete said.

"This filly," the little pianist went on, "can sidle up to that gunny leader, hold his attention while somebody else gets the drop on him. Divert that damn gun aim of his."

For bait, B-Flat concluded, they could air it about that a special game was on this time, and money filthy thick about. That would draw the bandit gang, sure as shooting.

He let the idea soak a while. Ben Sunter and the rest chewed it over, pro and con. Sunter was against it, playing right into Todd Ferret's hands, he held. Todd had hired the girl, and she probably would tell him everything. Sell them out, and that would be bad. But B-Flat Pete Soames just grinned at that, and twiddled the keys.

"You," he said mysteriously, "don't

know this gal. I do. She'd go through hell for me."

Pop Gumbert gawked, gave his guitar a plunk. "Th' kid must have somethin' in 'im we ain't discovered. I say we give his plan a chance."

Sunter and Addison finally gave in. The trap was set for Saturday next, when the big crowd usually trailed in for the weekend cutloose. It was decided that no one, outside the four of them, were to be in on the exact plan. To prevent slipups, Sunter, however, told Sheriff Merle Dane he'd better be on hand. The big game might draw another holdup.

"Won't be no holdup," Sheriff Dane said acidly. "I've played the goat for that damn gunny for the last time. If he shows his puss in Todd's place once more, he's cooked. I'll personally yank that mask off, and let the whole town see that it's Todd Ferret behind it. I hope to hell he does show up."

SATURDAY night the Rotgut-Free swelled with patrons. Every oil lamp in the place was newly polished, shed warm rays over the flushed faces of the dancers and gambling men at the tables. The Bearcat Four, minus their piano player, sweated out one tune after another, Big Ben Sunter sawing his fiddle for fair, Pop Gumbert plucking his guitar strings till his fingers ached.

Ollie Addison and his accordion furnished the accompaniment.

"B-Flat would get a belly-ache," he grumbled, pumping the bellows vigorously. "Right on the big night. And him backin' the whole plan."

"What I'm wonderin'," Ben Sunter chopped, "is when that dancer gal's comin' out. Something funny about us not even seein' her yet. No practice, or nothin'. B-Flat said she'd show up around eight."

It was twenty to eight, by the wall clock. At five to, a slim figure slipped out from the ferns and made for the orchestra. She had a veil over the lower part of her face, was dressed in a frothy thing of gauze which revealed her slender limbs beneath. Gold bands taped the dress

(Continued On Page 76)

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(Continued From Page 75)

to her ankles and wrists, and she wore sandals and held a tambourine in her right hand. She had a white azalea blossom in her soft blond hair.

She leaned close to Pop Gumbert on her way to the cleared center of the room. The old guitarist got a whiff of lilac perfume.

"Start the music, darling," she whispered. "First the Cockroach, with plenty of hot-tamalie!"

Pop Gumbert's eyes popped. Then with the rest prodding him, he fell in enthusiastically with "La Cucaracha."

"Lolita," as she was billed, gave the customers their money's worth. She swung a mean hip. She wiggled, she swayed, she whirled. Keeping time with her hands and slapping her tambourine, she weaved among the tables, emitting shrill little cries. Tough miners set down their glasses, watched the graceful form with eager eyes. In a corner, a group of cowboys clapped and whistled.

Even the faro dealer relaxed his grip on his deck. Lolita really was something.

Todd Ferret stood over by the bar, thumbs hooked in his vest, a cold smile on his face.

Sheriff Merle Dane and several of his posse hung around the swinging doors. He, too, was fascinated by the graceful figure out on the floor. It was with reluctance that he pulled his gaze away from the twinkling legs to the dust-streaked form of a man just now dismounting from a lathered bronc.

The fellow stumbled straight up to the lawman.

"The bank!" he gasped, spitting dryly, "Them damn outlaw gunnies is guttin' it now! I tried to stop 'em, was lucky to get away with my life."

The sheriff cursed. "Outsmarted! A bank job, with most of the town in here. Well, they won't get away with it. Come on, boys."

He and his posse scuttled down to their horses.

Ben Sunter, violin under chin, saw them leave. He cursed. "What the hell—" Then Ollie Addison nudged him with his foot. "Look," the ac-

cordionist said, "Ferret's leavin', too."

The big saloon owner's back was disappearing down the rear hallway. Despite the heat of the overcrowded room, the burst of applause which greeted a special twist of the Mexican Lolita, Ben Sunter felt a peculiar chill scamper up his spine. Something decidedly off-color was brewing, something that would spell trouble for someone.

Sunter's A-string parted with a snap. Fuming, the lanky violinist removed the curling catgut. He was inserting a new string, when the swinging doors belched inward and the group of masked gunmen once more entered the brilliantly lighted room.

"Everybody put 'em up!" the huge figure in the familiar black robe ordered.

EVERYONE, except the Bearcat Four, raised their hands. Lolita, still whirling to the wild music, had just passed the orchestra. She whsipered, "Keep playing!" to Ben Sunter, then continued on toward the advancing gunmen.

She swayed up to the masked leader, held out her arms appealingly to him.

"You no shoot Lolita, yes?" she said softly. "I dance for you, and you like me a little, mebbe?"

The robed gunman's black eyes snapped behind his mask. His gun lowered a bit, and he stepped forward.

"By God, yes!" he said hoarsely. "Gal, come here and give me a kiss!" His eyes traveled hotly over the dancer's young form.

Lolita gave a little squeal, tripped lightly over until her red mouth was an inch from the bandit's. The Mexican's arms crept up the black robe until they had encircled the thick neck.

"My b e e g, brave man," she breathed, removing the veil. Then she pulled suddenly backward.

The two of them went down in a heap, the bandit's gun exploding and sending a bullet skidding across the floor. The gunman let out a roar like a stabbed bull, for Lolita's teeth were clamped on the lobe of his ear, worrying it like a dog with a bone.

"Take 'er off, take 'er off!" the bandit howled.

The rest in the room weren't long in acting. Several cowpunchers went for their guns, had them out blazing in time with those of the gunnies. Women screamed, and some of the older men dove beneath the tables. Two of the lamps shattered, leaving a weird, unholy light over the place.

The Bearcat Four were huddled behind the cactus plants and ferns. Ollie Addison swore a blue streak at the way the slugs were bouncing around his accordion, and old Pop Gumbert had grabbed up his guitar like a club. Pop brought the instrument down on the head of a bandit who was leveling on a nearby miner.

The gunman sank groaning. Pop got the other's gun and started using it.

IN OUR NEXT ISSUE

GET OFF THE OWLHOOT!

A Superb Western Novelet

By T. W. Ford

Plus Stories by Joe Austell Small, Lee Floren, Archie Joscelyn, and Others

Ben Sunter's big fists were working. Already they had dropped three of the threshing outlaws. Everybody and everybody's cousin were milling about so the gunmen couldn't get in accurate shots. They became rattled, in the dim light mistook each other for an enemy. A new group of townsfolk surged in, and the fight was over.

Someone lit up more lamps and the saloon thus revealed was a sight. Bodies, chairs, broken bottles and blood streaks all over the floor. In the center of the room were the figures of the masked leader and Lolita. The robed bandit lay on the floor, unmoving. He had bruises on his face, and blood trickled from his battered lips.

Lolita, the dancer, stood up. She gave a yank at her smooth blond hair. Blond tresses came off, leaving the short black hair of a man.

"That's that," the fellow said calmly.

Ben Sunter nearly fell over backward on his violin. "B-Flat!" he choked.

"B-Flat!" said Ollie Addison, unbelieving.

Pop Gumbert just stared. His tongue was frozen in his mouth.

It was B-Flat Pete Soames, all right. B-Flat Pete, Lolita, the Mex dancer, all one and the same person. The little pianist tossed aside the blond wig, sheepishly wiped the rouge from his face and lips.

"I felt like a damn fool," he said, "but it was worth it. There's your bandit, Ben Sunter. Now who was right about Todd Ferret?"

SUNTER tore the mask from the face of the beaten gunman. There was a gasp from the crowd as the heavy features of Sheriff Merle Dane were revealed. B-Flat Pete Soames nodded.

"Dane had the town fooled good. While he allegedly was out after hot clues, him and his men would mask up, come back and do their robbin'. It was easy to place the blame on Ferret, who wasn't any too popular here to start with. Dane stole that lucky piece of Ferret's, dropped it where it would do the most harm. Dane and his whole posse are crooked as hell. Looks like the law in this town is going to need some tall revampin'."

Todd Ferret came in then, and he was dragging two of the bandits in his big arms like dolls. Ferret's expressionless face wore the ghost of a smile, there was actually a twinkle in his brittle dark eyes.

"Got lots of work to do," he said. "Elect a new sheriff, a posse we can trust, and," he chuckled, "Give out that reward. You boys ain't forgot the sheriff's generous offer, have you? Ten grand to the gent or gents who got them bandits."

Merle Dane had come around. He groaned and rubbed his aching jaw. He groaned some more when he heard Ferret mention about the reward coming from his, Dane's, own pocket.

Ben Sunter gripped Todd Ferret by the hand. "I was wrong some about you, pardner," he admitted honestly. "I was wrong about a lot of things. I reckon all of us will listen to what our kid pianist here has to say from now on."

He turned to thump B-Flat Pete gratefully on the back. Ollie and Pop encored that. Ollie now could have his accordion fixed, Pop could buy a new guitar, ten guitars if he wanted them. And they all had a permanent job here at the Rotgut-Free. Everything was rosy.

B-Flat Pete Soames paused on his way back to the piano. The little man's eyes held a determined look.

"One thing I ask from now on," he told his pals, "is that you forget this masquerade of mine. The first monkey what calls me 'Lolita', gets his ears parted, with interest. Let's make with the music, fellers. Boys out there look like they crave a little entertainment."

He sat down by the piano, began whanging out "Arkansas Traveller" in B-flat.

THE END

COMPLETE NOVELET

BY JOE AUSTELL SMALL

(Author of "Hell Would Be Welcome," "Dig Swamp Graves Shallow" etc.)

In the clear water, the sheriff saw the reflection of old Slawson's body above him.

KILLERS ARE ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ CURIOUS

Sheriff Wes Simpson had to lay a dangerous trap for a too-clever killer!

SHERIFF Wes Simpson lay on his belly in the thin chaparral brush that flanked Cottonwood Creek and swore softly. It was hot on the creek bottom; sticky hot.

That, and the tense excitement, caused him to sweat freely. And the old lawman didn't like to sweat. It felt uncomfortably sticky in the reddish-gray mustache that bunched out like a tuft of matted crab grass under his nose.

He was lying there now, breathing freely and blowing his upper lip. One more little hump on the ragged creek bank and he'd be within range. But that rocky little rise was his one danger point. It was bare and hard and covered with loose rocks that would gouge his tender belly. But if he could only slide across that barrier into the weedy little pocket beyond....

The old sheriff slid forward slowly. He took off his hat and placed it under a snarl of drift brush. He flattened out, pressed his belly to the hard, uneven rock hump, and worked ahead painfully.

The walls of old Wes Simpson's belly felt like a deflated goat-hide water gourd when he finally slid across the pitted rock hump and lay breathing heavily in the small weed sink beyond. His hands were smarting too, bleeding a little in one place. But the old lawman was smiling. He was there at last. And from this vantage point he ought to reach his goal. Carefully the old lawman rose to his knees behind the protecting weed screen and prepared for action.

The sharp reports of iron-clad hoofs came to him then like the echoing bark of a rifle. It was like the rip of a thunder bolt in the static stillness. A slab of water-worn soapstone broke from its precarious hold on the upper creek bank and slid down the long incline. It started a miniature landslide.

Wes Simpson held his breath as a round, red pebble bounced toward the old Bronzeback Hole directly beneath him. It slowed perceptibly, came to a rest on the very brink, and then rolled over as a bit of loose dirt gave way under it. There followed a loud "plop" and the accompanying softer sounds of erupting water drops settling back on the pool.

Sheriff Wes Simpson pushed his long, thin frame forward quickly, craned a patch-wrinkled neck over the bank, and glanced at the hole of water below. He rose with a lurch then. There was a sound like hot steam rising in his throat. And when it came out of the old lawman's mouth, it was still hot.

He turned in time to see a rider melt into the huisache brush that flanked the creek from both sides.

"GAWD o'mighty hellfire! Damnation! Blast yore ornery hide to happy hell!" Wes Simpson shook a grizzled fist at the spot where the rider had disappeared. "The best damned chance I've had of catching that crafty old bronzeback in three years—had him same as on the stringer—and you had to mess it up! I hate yore guts, whoever you are! I'd like to bounce a .44 slug off yore block head. I'd—"

The old lawman gave up then. He drained the fetid breath from his lungs in one long sigh, resignedly picked up the willow pole and grasshopper-baited hook that he had prepared so carefully and walked back for his hat.

"I'd a'got him that time shore," he beraved. "Biggest danged bass in Cottonwood Creek. An' the smart son-of-a-gun hadn't seen me. He was just lyin' out there sunnin' calm as you please. I'as within easy castin' range. If I could a'just swung my pole around, plopped that big grasshopper out in front of him like it'd jumped in natural—" The disappointment in Wes Simpson's voice seemed to weight it down, to squash it out altogether.

The old lawman shrugged his shoulders then and smiled dryly. "Well, anyhow, I got to see that old bass again. Old Sump Slawson hasn't won our bet over who'll bring the old bronzeback in yet. He won't strike at anything today after that scare. Believe I'll walk up the hole a ways and see if I can spot the old scallywag hiding under that grapevine snarl. Water's pretty clear today."

Wes Simpson didn't usually talk to himself. But out fishing a man is supposed to relax, do a heap of things he doesn't usually do. The old

lawman liked to talk to and about that wily old bass. Saying it out loud made it seem more important.

He walked over to the grapevine snarl, got down on his hands and knees on the bank, put his face down close to the water and peered through a break in the vines.

The bleared, unseeing eyes of old Sump Slawson stared up at him from the limpid water.

Sheriff Wes Simpson jumped back as if a cottonmouth moccasin had struck at his face from the cool depths. The old lawman sucked in his breath involuntarily and a prickling sensation ran up his spine. Feverishly, he tore at the matted vines overhead. A beam of sunlight sifted through the ragged rip he made in the mat of leaves and streamers. It lightened the depths underneath. There was no mistaking what he saw now. Old Sump Slawson was lying there on his back in the Bronzeback Hole.

LONG bushy eyebrows bunched, and there was a frown on Wes Simpson's face as he sat in a heel-squat and looked at the man he had just pulled out of Cottonwood Creek. Sump Slawson hadn't drowned in the creek. He'd been shot in the head from close range. The old man had been dead for some time.

The sheriff rose with a sigh. This murder had him guessing. The other two had a very definite motive. Money. Since the Cottonwood First State Bank had closed six months ago, there had been two murders. Two murders in a little county like Mesquite, over a period of six months, were too many. The people were raising hell. This third would just about finish up the old sheriff if he didn't find the guilty party.

Wes Simpson walked up the gentle rise to his little palomino. Returning to the Bronzeback Hole, he strapped old Sump's body behind his saddle and rode up the creek. There wasn't much use, but he'd inspect old Sump's house. The murderer probably hadn't bothered to go through the old man's things. Sump didn't have enough money to warrant a stick-up,

(Continued On Page 82)

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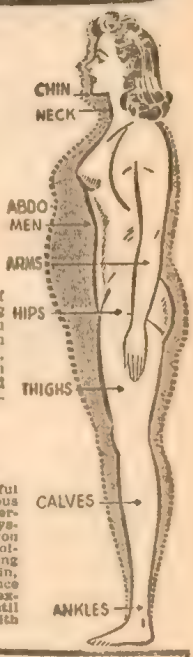

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(Continued From Page 81)

much less a murder. That's what worried the old sheriff. He'd figured out the motives and was working on a lead when this happened. Now it balled him all up again.

Things were in place in the tiny swayback cabin under the big live oak tree atop the little rise overlooking Cottonwood Creek. Wes Simpson rubbed a stubbled chin reflectively, studied the cabin closely again, and walked outside. He picked up an old slicker from a deer-head rack on the porch. He'd use it to cover old Sump's body.

HANK WINTERS, local saloon owner, was leaning against the outside wall of the Sheriff's office when Wes Simpson rode up. He eyed the willow pole critically.

"Whar yuh been, Sheriff?" he asked pointedly.

"Out fishin', a'course!" old Wes answered, a bit irritated. Before the last word got out of his mouth, the old sheriff was sorry he had said it.

"Fishin' when there's a money-crazed murderer runnin' loose in the community!" There was acrid sarcasm in Hank Winter's voice. "Reckon folks'll remember that, come election!"

Wes Simpson didn't answer. He dismounted and pulled the slicker from the body behind his saddle. Then he studied Hank Winters closely as the tall man's face changed expression.

"Another one! My God! Who is it, Wes?" Frank Winters stepped forward quickly.

The news spread fast. Half the little town's population was crowded around the Sheriff's office in fifteen minutes. Wes Simpson had carried the body into the little back room behind his office. He stationed Tom Stokes at the door and told the stocky deputy to admit only three men whose names he called.

As the three filed past the body at separate intervals, Wes Simpson watched their faces closely. Slade Weatherford tightened his lips and shook a black head slowly. Slade owned the livery store and knew everybody in Mesquite County. "It

ain't no reason for a man like old Sump Slawson being shot like that," he said. "The man didn't have no enemies that I know of."

Jess Crawford, rancher and owner of the Cottonwood Banner—sometimes actually helping the stooped, bald headed printer put it out—hooked slender thumbs in a wide belt and fixed the Sheriff with accusing eyes. Jess was tall and slightly hump shouldered. There was a wart with a black hair centered in it on his chin. When he got stirred up, it was always white. The wart was white now.

"Wes, when in the confounded hell are we gonna get somewheres with this killin' mystery? Since the bank went busted and people have had to keep their money at home, there's been two robbery-killin's. Now here's another!"

"This man wasn't killed for his money," Tom Stokes spoke in a barely audible tone. He had closed the front door and walked quietly into the tiny room. He stood now, leaning against the door facing, thumbs carelessly hooked in his cartridge belt, a half smile on his surly face. It looked like the stocky deputy was actually enjoying this latest murder. Perhaps he was thinking about what would happen if the citizens ran old Wes Simpson out of town. He'd be the Sheriff until they could elect another—and they might even elect him....

"That's right," Jess Crawford glanced at the big deputy as if he had just seen him for the first time. "I hadn't thought of that."

"There's a good many things we haven't thought of," Hank Winters turned and walked out the door. "Some of us better get started. And it's gonna take more than just thinking to get the man who's responsible for these murders. It's gonna take more action and less fishin'...."

Slade Weatherford and Jess Crawford looked at Sheriff Wes Simpson sharply. Then they too turned and walked out.

"Anything for me to do before I go eat a bite?" Tom Stokes asked.

(Continued On Page 84)

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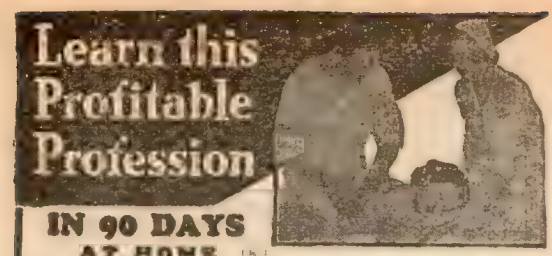

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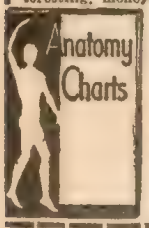

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(Continued From Page 83)

"No, go on and eat," the old lawman replied absent-mindedly.

There was a tight smile on Deputy Tom Stokes' face when he stopped at the door. He glanced back at Wes Simpson and spoke in a pseudo-curious tone. "Didn't happen to hook that old bronzeback, didja, Sheriff?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked off the porch. The loose boards rattled under his heavy tread.

IT WAS mid-afternoon when Wes Simpson finally decided on a course to take. He pounded the whittle-topped desk with a hairy fist then and his lips parted in a smile. There was a quiver of excitement to the old lawman's voice when he called Tom Stokes and told him to round up three suspects immediately for questioning in the little back room. Then as the bulky deputy reached the door, old Wes called his name in a voice that was low, smooth. The big man paused and looked at his superior, a little irritated.

"I'll want you there too," old Wes Simpson said simply. He smiled then and went on about his business.

The big deputy stood there for a moment. His under lip quivered in a near question, then he turned and walked outside, his eyebrows lowered. Tom Stokes didn't know just how to take that simple command.

Hank Winters sat on a window sill in the small back room, rubbed the tip end of a black handkerchief across a dull spot on his shiny boots and fixed Wes Simpson with a critical eye. "If I can be any help in throwin' some light on these murders, Sheriff," he began in a protesting tone of voice, "I'll be glad to run over every time your mind changes. But I've got a saloon business to keep goin' and—"

"I'm purty sure that this is the last time I'll call on you, Hank," Wes Simpson cut in. He looked at the man significantly. A slow flush pushed the pallor from the saloon owner's cheeks.

"I can see the headlines in my own paper," old Jess Crawford's voice carried a tone of facetious mockery.

He hooked a worn boot heel in the bottom rib of his bull-hide bottomed chair, leaned back against the wall and smiled wryly. "COTTONWOOD NEWSPAPER OWNER TO SWING FOR THREE GRISLY MURDERS! We might even sell some street copies on that edition—just like they do in the cities!" He chuckled, half amused, and fumbled across the front of his goatskin vest for the small pocket that held his smoking tobacco.

Slade Weatherford stood with his right foot propped up on a rope-bottomed chair. He rested his right elbow on the elevated knee and whittled at a slab of hard pine. He held the long-bladed skinning knife in his left hand. The livery store owner seemed to be having trouble controlling his nerves.

"If I done it, hurry up and say so, Sheriff. I'll have to get someone to run my livery business if I have to go turkey-neck on you!" He chuckled dryly.

Tom Stokes stood in a corner, having trouble keeping a brown cigarette lit and taking longer and more pains than necessary to relight it each time.

The men formed a little arc at the back end of the room. The board slab, on which lay old Sump Slawson's body, rested at the opposite side of the room. There was a sheet over it now.

Sheriff Wes Simpson walked to the center of the room and stood facing the accused arc of Cottonwood citizenry. They looked at him expectantly.

"Gentlemen," he began. "I believe the murderer of three Mesquite County citizens is right here in this room."

There was an uneasy stirring among the little group. Each man looked at every member of the suspect arc and in turn was looked at himself. No one spoke. The Sheriff continued.

"It's a man that 'bout everybody in the county knows. These three murders took place in far separated parts of the county. When the bank closed, the man we're after decided that he'd make a few stick-ups among

(Continued On Page 86)

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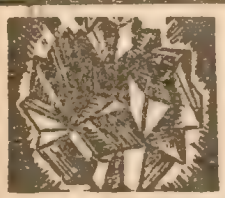

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(Continued From Page 85)

the better-heeled citizens. He knew they'd have their money at home. He got caught in the act on his first try and had to shoot old Josh Howard. Old Josh had run up on him unexpected. The old man didn't have a gun. There was no reason for him being shot but for one thing—he knew the robber.

"After that first killin', it didn't bother the murderer so much when he had to do it again several months later. He laid low for awhile of course; and that second killin' was like the first—to keep his identity unknown. This last shootin' shows that the man don't mind throwin' lead into anybody now. He's a danger to the whole county."

THE old sheriff paused, poured a filling of crimp cut into a burnt briar and continued. "It might a'taken a long time to ever run down the guilty man because he's smart—damned smart! But he killed just one man too many, and he was standing too close up when he done it.

"It's a known official fact that sometimes the picture of the murderer is stamped in the retina of the murdered man's eyes. I read it in a book, and I checked up on it. There's cases on record. The dyin' eye muscles hold the last scene a man is lookin' at when he dies. It happens once in every so many thousand times. It happened in this case, gentlemen. I didn't notice it for awhile; it's dim, but you can make it out." Wes Simpson walked over and pulled down the sheet, exposing the dead man's face. "The man we're looking for, gentlemen, is photographed on the unseein' eyes of the man he killed!" The old lawman stood there, holding the sheet in his hands and looking at old Sump Slawson's open eyes.

A sudden tenseness gripped the suspected men. Slade Weatherford stopped his whittling, his knife already raised for another slash at the dwindling pine slab. Patches of white crept into his smooth-shaven chin. His eyes stared at the sheriff in utter disbelief.

The front legs of Jess Crawford's

bull-hide bottomed chair banged down on the floor as the man leaned forward suddenly. His boot heels made hollow thumps on the floor as they struck, lifeless. He sat in a forward crouch, staring as if mesmerized by the dead ghost of old Sump Slawson. The big wart on his chin was a livid white.

Hank Winters had jerked abruptly erect as the meaning of old Wes Simpson's words penetrated his brain. The black handkerchief fell from a loose grip and settled slowly to the floor. He slid down from his perch on the window sill, took a step forward, his eyes fascinated by the sight of the dead man's face. Hank Winters caught himself then, stopped suddenly. He looked around the room. Three men were watching him closely. Tom Stokes had pulled the startled expression off his face and it carried a thin, tight smile instead.

A deep flush pushed the shocked interest from Hank Winter's face. He took one backward step, picked up his fallen handkerchief, and calmly resumed polishing the spot on his boot.

A QUICK surge of disappointment crept over Sheriff Wes Simpson's face. He didn't permit it to linger though. The old lawman smiled a little stiffly, carefully placed the sheet back over the dead man's face and spoke in a low voice.

"Jest wanted to tell you men this," he said, "and to tell you to be in town tomorrow. I think I could be safe in arresting the guilty person now, but the likeness is a little dim. I sent a wire to Bronson. A man with one of them high powered photographing machines will be here tomorrow. Also, a man with one of them enlarging glasses you look through and it makes things four or five times bigger than they appear with the naked eye. With them two things, we'll have enough evidence to convict a man. And if one of you want to leave out tonight, that's all right too. We won't have to bother about working up a case against you

(Continued On Page 88)

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(Continued From Page 87)

when you're caught. That's all, men. Thank'ye for comin' over."

They filed out hesitantly, as if to rush would point the finger of guilt at someone. Their shock worn off, the men joked a little, said they'd have to keep their eyes shut next time they shot someone.

When the last voice had trailed away, Tom Stokes stood staring at the little sheriff. "I want to look at old Sump Slawson's eyes," he stated flatly. "I don't believe what you just said."

"Why, Tom," the old lawman said. "You don't think I'd lie about a thing like that?" There was exaggerated seriousness in old Wes Simpson's voice.

"Too bad it didn't work," Tom Stokes said, walking toward the Sheriff. "Purty good idea at that. Springin' it like that, all of a sudden, was liable to a'taken the murderer by such complete surprise that he'd a'rushed over to see if his picture was on the dead man's eyes. It would've been a dead give away. But the men you're dealin' with on this case are smart, Sheriff, damned smart!"

"Yeah, they're smart all right," Wes Simpson spoke lifelessly. He stared out the window.

To Tom Stokes, it looked like the old sheriff had played his trump card and it had failed. He smiled, talked easily. "Course I ain't doubtin' your word a'tall, Sheriff," he said, "but these eye-picture things are so uncommonly rare—I'd like to take a look at it. Sort of unbelievable, you know. I just sort of figured you cooked the whole thing up to catch someone off guard...."

Sheriff Wes Simpson looked his burly deputy straight in the eyes. The muscles strained in his under jaw as his vision narrowed. "Put this in yore pipe and smoke hell outta it, Tom." The old lawman's voice was hard, confident. "Them dead eyes of Sump Slawson's will send this here murderer I'm after to his death shorer'n hell!"

Tom Stokes' eyes shifted under the direct gaze. His thick lips worked, but no sounds came out.

Killers Are Curious

"Now go get that triflin' undertaker, old 'Bout Dead Johnson. He can prepare the body and fix it so it'll keep all right till tomorrow. I'll let you look at the eyes of this corpse then...."

SHERIFF Wes Simpson jerked his head back, shook it like a dog shedding water, and slapped himself resoundly on the face. The old lawman hadn't missed a good night's sleep since that all-night ride after the Gant gang two years ago, but it looked like he'd see the sun rise without a snore this night.

The little sheriff screwed up his face in a protesting shudder and wondered if any spot on earth smelled as foul as an undertaking parlor. Odor of the formaldehyde fluid itself was enough to make a man turn pale. And old 'Bout Dead Johnson was none too clean with his work at that.

A wind that came in gusts rattled the flimsy little three-roomed shack and caused it to shiver sporadically. An old tin water bucket banged loose from its holding nail on the outside wall of the tiny kitchen and made weird, clattering noises as it clanged down a slight rocky incline.

Old Wes Simpson nodded again and slapped his lean face once more. He squirmed around in his uncomfortable elongated position in an empty coffin in a corner of the big room and pulled at a heavy watch. A full moon shoved a ray of light through the dirty window panes to his left. The coffin lid was propped open slightly to give him air. If the leaves of a leaning peach tree would quit dancing around over those window panes, breaking up the moon's pale rays, maybe he could see what time it was. Finally, the old sheriff managed to make out the approximate position of the short hand on his watch. Around 3:00 A. M. and nothing stirring yet.

Wes Simpson glanced across the room and to the plain casket that held the corpse of old Sump Slawson. From his angle of vision, he could see just half of the man's face. It showed out a ghostly white in the

(Continued On Page 90)

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(Continued From Page 89)

pale gloom. A shiver ran up the old lawman's back and he lay back down.

The rats had started that peculiar rustling noise in the loft again. Maybe they would help keep him awake. He listened with accentuated interest, trying to visualize in his mind just what actions the little vermin were making to produce certain sounds.

Old Wes Simpson's eyes opened wide then. The heavy drowsiness drained from them in one quick sweep. His heart suddenly beat faster. He could feel blood pounding up through that big vein in his neck. The old lawman lay there in the big casket at stiff attention. There it was again. A sound like that couldn't be made by a rat. It was like someone had taken hold of a shingle and yanked—

Wes Simpson stiffened perceptibly The sensation of wood lice crawling in his stomach caused him to suck in his breath. Hell, it was simple when a man started thinking about it! The murderer would know that the room would be locked tight, and guarded surely. But, most likely, it would be guarded from the outside. Now if a man could pull out some of those loose shingles on the flimsy roof, let himself down into the loft, he could find the tiny square plug in the ceiling and—that was it! It would be the way a smart murderer would work!

THE old lawman craned his neck to get a better look at the ceiling. He had no idea where the tiny wooden plug-door was that led up into the loft. Loft entrances in most houses were used maybe once in every five years. They were made so that the casual eye wouldn't detect them at all in the easy flow of the ceiling. But the murderer would have less trouble finding it from above. A cross board, nailed to the small plug and heeled out over the loft flooring, held the tiny door in place.

There was a muffled thump then as cautious feet touched the flooring above. The man had let himself down from a small hole he had made in the shingled roof above. Im-

mediately there followed a scraping sound and the soft tread of booted feet on the loft flooring. The man had struck a match and was looking for that floor plug that would let him down into the room.

The old sheriff rolled on his left side noiselessly, brought a gnarled hand up to his holster and slowly pulled out his old long barreled .44. He eared back the hammer so that metallic click wouldn't give him away when the murderer was near. Wes Simpson lay the heavy gun down beside his face in the narrow casket and waited. A grim, tight smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

There was enough light seeping through the room's two windows to show up the ceiling dimly. Suddenly a dark hole bit at the squared board smoothness above. A face appeared slowly, cautiously. The man looked over the room below for a long moment. He let a tiny bit of dried mud from a dirt-dauber's nest fall on the floor below and waited for any possible reactions. The man knew that he had effected a quiet entrance. If anyone were in the room below, they ought to make some movement to investigate the sharp plump of the tiny hardened mud particle.

Apparently satisfied that it was safe enough inside the big room, the man let down a rope, hand over hand, carefully. He made it fast to a rafter then, and proceeded to squeeze through the small square and let himself down noiselessly.

The big man stood in a tense crouch when his feet touched the floor. He glanced around the room quickly, then surveyed it minutely. A long, black gun arced nervously in the pale gloom. He lowered both window shades quickly then and struck a match. The big man surveyed the room quickly again, sighted a stubby candle and walked toward it.

Wes Simpson lowered his head. The candle would throw out enough light for the man to see him if he tried to peer through the tiny slit. His heart was beating fast. Now that

(Continued On Page 92)

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(Continued From Page 91)

the thing he'd looked forward to so long had finally materialized, he hardly knew what to do.

The old lawman saw light bloom out in the room then and knew he couldn't wait much longer. He took a long breath, counted five, grasped the reassuring handle of his heavy .44, and pushed the coffin lip up quickly.

The man across the room wheeled. Wes Simpson heard the startled exclamation die in his throat. There was a long knife in the man's left hand. He held the stubby candle in his right.

"'Mornin', Slade!" Wes Simpson said. His gun was trained on the big man's middle. "You look mighty peart for this early in the mornin'! Wasn't plannin' on whittlin' somebody's eyes out, was yuh?"

SLADE WEATHERFORD'S face was almost as white as the corpse by his side. His eyes were blared, frightened. The candle shook in his right hand, causing shimmering flickers to dance about the room.

"The second you drop that candle I'll plug you!" Wes Simpson stated coldly. "Walk forward slowly; keep both hands up even with your chin. I want to take that gun off yore hip."

Later, Sheriff Wes Simpson knew he'd been a fool to watch that right hand. He'd known damned well that the livery store owner was left handed. The man's gun was holstered on his right side all right, but it hung butt forward for a quick left hand cross draw.

By the time he realized it, Slade Weatherford had walked up to him, dropped the knife and was grabbing down swiftly, it was too late. He jerked trigger but the long hammer fell on the skin separating Slade Weatherford's thumb and index finger. The big man had effectively blocked hammer action, and in another moment had jerked the gun from Wes Simpson's hand.

"Always thought you'd muddle in a showdown, Wes," the big man said. He smiled. "I guess maybe this is it."

"Maybe it is at that, Slade," the old sheriff spoke slowly. The vitality had drained from his voice. He looked a little foolish, sitting there upright in a coffin, his empty right hand still half extended.

"That eye-picture theory of yours was pretty catchy, Wes," Slade Weatherford continued in a low voice. "Pity you had to muff it right at the pay off!" There was deep mockery in his voice now. The big man seemed to be in no especial hurry. He figured the old sheriff to be playing a lone hand. Here in this room, at 3:00 o'clock in the morning, he felt relatively safe. So, before Slade Weatherford placed a handkerchief around the muzzle of his gun to silence the sharp bark and shot old Wes, he felt like doing a little leering at the vanquished.

Slade Weatherford was pointing the Sheriff's own gun at the old lawman's face, and, if anyone rushed through the door nearby, he could stop them cold by a quick snap shot. "I just looked at old Sump's eyes, Wes," the big man continued. "There ain't no picture in 'em. How come you suspected me?" There was a light of sadistic curiosity in his eyes.

"You knew everybody and his dog in the county, Slade." Old Wes Simpson pulled himself to a sitting posture in the coffin and fixed the big man with dull grey eyes. "Folks'd come in, leave their horses with you. A man can learn a lot about people that way. Some of their secrets when they're a little drunk too. 'Bout where they keep their valuables, yuh know."

"You found out from that loose-tongued deputy of mine that I thought old Sump Slawson knew something about the Josh Howard shootin'. He was old Josh's best friend, and even if he didn't know anything definite, he prob'ly had a good hunch. I was fishin' with him pretty regular, workin' up on his warm side, so maybe I could get the old man to talk. That's what you was afraid of. So you quieted him down." The old sheriff seemed to be interested in his own story. There

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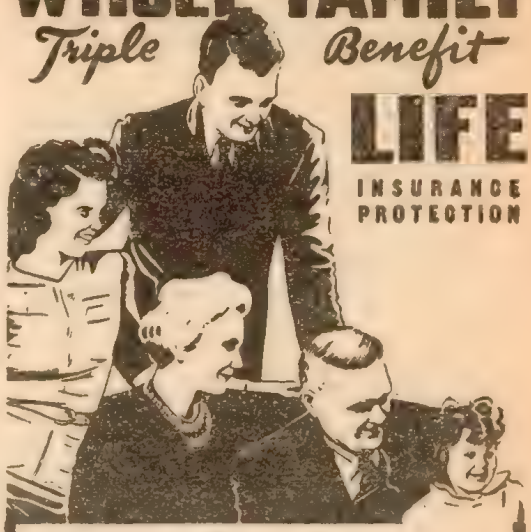

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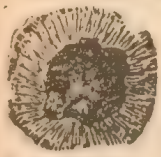

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was the hint of pride of detection in his tired old eyes.

"AFTER you'd shot him, you didn't have time to hide the body good because someone might have heard the shot and investigated. So you kicked him into the creek, figurin' on comin' back later and weightin' him down. You saw me messin' around too close to where he was when you came back and was afraid the body might swell and rise.

"That rock that plumped into the old Bronzeback Hole was thrown, Slade. There wasn't enough incline and the distance was too far for it to roll clean from the far slope of the second bank down to the creek. And that rock was throwed left handed. The man that threw it was ridin' with his right side to the creek. I saw that much as you disappeared through the brush, even though I couldn't make out who it was. No man could a'twisted around in his saddle and throwed that rock, off balance as he'd been, hard enough with his right hand to a'made it reach the creek. For a man that was left handed, it would have been hard but possible—since he'd have a natural swing.

"You wanted to spoil my fishin' for the day, Slade, so I'd go on back to town and you could put the finishin' touches on your work. If you hadn't spoiled it, I might a'messed around there a long time trying to catch that old bass and accidentally found something...."

"You had it all figured out, didn't you, lawdog?" there was a sneer of resentment on the big man's face. "But with a bullet hole through your heart, it won't do you or nobody else much good, now will it?" There was pseudo-benignance in his tone now.

"You won't get away with it, Slade. You—"

"The hell I won't!" The big man barked. "Nobody's got to first base on this case but you—and it'd been better for your health if you hadn't." He smiled then. "Won't it be handy for old 'Bout Dead now? I'll shoot you where you sit and he won't even have to move you out of the coffin!"

Killers Are Curious

The big man eared back the hammer on old Wes Simpson's gun. His eyes narrowed. The old lawman gritted his teeth. It was coming now.

Slade Weatherford dropped the stubby candle then. Unnoticed in his grim sadistic intent, the blaze had eaten down to his right fist. Even as the big man's sharp exclamation of pain came, old Wes Simpson went into action. He jerked heavily to the left. The coffin slid sidewise, banged heavily on the floor. A crimson flash licked at its under side. The old sheriff rolled out quickly. His groping hands found the coffin lid then. He jumped aside, out of line of a possible shot. It was dark in the room now. Their eyes having grown accustomed to the candle light, neither of the men could see movements of the other.

Wes Simpson had swung quickly to the side. He jumped in toward the flashes of light from an angle now, brought the heavy wooden lid down forcefully on Slade Weatherford's head. The man went down. Wes Simpson jumped atop him, his hands searching feverishly for a gun. He found it then, the big, hard handle of Slade Weatherford's holstered .45. The old sheriff jerked it out. As he did so, the big man rolled to the side, scrambled to his knees and was suddenly quiet. His head was clearing fast. He heard his quarry move then, and a yellow stream of fire licked out at the old lawman.

Wes Simpson felt his left leg go numb. He swung the heavy gun around then, drove a stream of fire at the flash of Slade Weatherford's gun. It was answered quickly. A hot slug of lead found the old lawman's left side. It made his head spin crazily. Old Wes Simpson bent over in a crouch then. He worked back the hammer of the big gun methodically. He crouched low, looking into flashing death, and worked the cylinder around. Then Wes Simpson sank slowly to the floor. He sighed once and lay still.

THE old lawman was on one of 'Bout Dead Johnson's stretchers

(Continued On Page 96)

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(Continued From Page 95)

when he got back of his eyes again.

"Reckon I'm dead, Jess?" He looked up into the old newspaperman's eyes.

"Reckon you ain't, Wes," the tall man grinned excitedly. "Fairly holy though. Ought to pull through all right if we can ever get that damned Doc down here. Heard the shootin' and came on the run. Everybody in town, looks like, is on their way down here!" The newspaperman smiled.

"Only one dead herebouts, besides old Sump," he continued, "is Slade Weatherford. He's leakin' in five places! Good work, Sheriff! How'd you figure it?"

The doctor rushed in then. On his heels came Tom Stokes, wild-eyed and excited.

"The two things I like to do most, Jess," the old sheriff smiled slowly, "are fish and study human nature. It's just natural with most folks to be curious. That eye-picture business is an old joke with city detectives. Ain't one chance in a million of it happenin'. Nobody downright believed it when I told the story, but every danged one of you was curious! And it's natural that the killer'd be more curious than anybody! He felt sort of foolish lookin' into the matter like that, but at the same time he couldn't hardly afford not to!"

"Well, I'll be damned!" the old newspaperman said slowly.

"No vital spots hit," the doctor said after a brief examination. "He'll pull through. Let's get him to my office!"

"Take charge here, Tom," the old sheriff directed his deputy.

"Yessir, Boss!" the big man answered humbly. "I sure will!"

"Wes," the newspaperman said as he helped carry the old lawman to the doctor's office. "This'll sure make a good story!"

"Go ahead and print it, Jess," the old lawman said. "But don't print anything about that big bass of Cottonwood Creek!" Sheriff Wes Simpson grinned wryly and closed his eyes. "After Doc gets through reshinglin' my coverin', I'm headin' back for the woods. Got a little fishin' to get caught up on!"

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with this amazing offer! Act at once and get in on this amazing offer. You who have always yearned to play the clarinet will get hours and hours of fun and unusual entertainment out of this CLARINET HARMONET. Get yours now and get the full benefit of the exceptional FREE OFFER made for a limited time only. With this sensational offer, you only pay for the CLARINET HARMONET. and we include many other features FREE. If you have ever heard the Kings of Jazz, up in front of their bands, playing the hottest and sweetest music in the world on their clarinets—if you have envied the magic of their notes, then this offer is made to help you. Read on and learn all about this offer

A REAL MUSICAL INSTRUMENT YOU PLAY DURING THE VERY FIRST LESSON!

The amazing part of the CLARINET HARMONET. is that it is a genuine musical instrument . . . yet, you can play it during the very first lesson even if you have had no previous musical knowledge. More surprising is the fun and popularity that will follow you when you play this CLARINET HARMONET. You will be sought everywhere and gain friends. You will find this musical instrument a tonic for happiness, a companion to while away time that now seems to hang heavy when you are alone . . . you'll play real music . . . real songs and you will play by ear or from notes. The CLARINET HARMONET. is actually played and not hummed through, but it is so easy to master, you will be astonished. When you've mastered this instrument, you've learned the basic fingering of the Saxaphone, Clarinet and Flute.

JUST REMEMBER THE TWO WORDS "BAG" AND "FED" —THAT EASY Sounds simple, doesn't it? and it is! We have worked out a course of instructions so simple that even if you never could read a note of music before, you will play the CLARINET HARMONET. correctly from music. With this copyrighted feature, you just remember two simple words, which are "BAG" and "FED." If you know the alphabet from A to G, or can count from 1 to 7, and we are sure you do, you can play the CLARINET HARMONET. You master the fingering of the holes by a simplified number system. Before you know it, your CLARINET HARMONET. produces flute-like musical notes . . . all sharps and flats are playable so as to bring out professional-like musical melodies. Thousands of songs, including patriotic, popular or instrumental pieces can be played easily and quickly by following the simple fast-moving instructons. You begin your first lesson by playing the patriotic song "America," and after a few moments of learning the fingering you can go on from there playing any popular piece . . . we also show you how to mark songs for easy CLARINET HARMONET. playing. Everything is included. It's light and portable. There is nothing else to buy but ACT AT ONCE because this offer is LIMITED.

5 DAYS FREE TRIAL

You don't risk a single cent . . . no indeed! We are positive you will be satisfied. We are confident you will never part with this CLARINET HARMONET. for double the price . . . order yours today and try it for 5 days and if you are not 100% delighted, but we are sure you will be, return it and we will refund your $1.98 at once.

SCHOOLS & GROUPS ***Write for our Special Proposition***

So easy to play well!

You too can play the HARMONET. It's EASY . . . it's EDUCATIONAL . . . it's FUN.

Why many music educators prefer the HARMONET.

- The HARMONET is chromatic, with a two octave range.
- The HARMONET, equipped with a thumb rest like that of the clarinet and saxophone.
- The HARMONET has ridges between the fingering holes to guide the fingers in finding and covering the holes.
- The HARMONET holes are closely and evenly spaced so that even a child can reach them.
- The HARMONET mouthpiece is adjustable making it possible to tune the instrument to the piano.
- The HARMONET music holder is attachable right to the instrument.
- The HARMONET is a "C" instrument and can be played with the piano.

Rush coupon now!

ALL OF THIS INCLUDED—ONLY $1.98

Here you will find listed all that is included with this amazing musical instrument value.

No. 1—You get a regular-sized CLARINET HARMONET.

No. 2—In addition, you also receive a full instruction course. This course is written in easy-to-understand language. It is fast-moving and not in the least bit complicated. It helps you to play quickly and correctly in a professional-like manner.

No. 3—We also include 6 popular songs which will be marked by our arranger for instant CLARINET HARMONET playing. These songs sell for 35 cents a copy, making the 6 of them total a value of $2.10. All in all, we are giving you over $5.00 worth at the bargain price of $1.98 plus postage; but you must ACT AT ONCE because this offer may be withdrawn.

Send no money!

Sign your name and address to coupon and rush it to us. Give the postman $1.98 plus approximately 30c postage upon delivery or send $2.00 now and we pay postage. ACT AT ONCE.

Popular Music League, Dept. 1108
Rockville Centre, N. Y.

Send me at once C.O.D. CLARINET HARMONET along with instructions and 8 popular songs. I will pay postman $1.98 plus approximately 30c postage on arrival. If I am not satisfied after five days trial, I will return for refund.

I am enclosing $2.00 in full payment, same guarantee.

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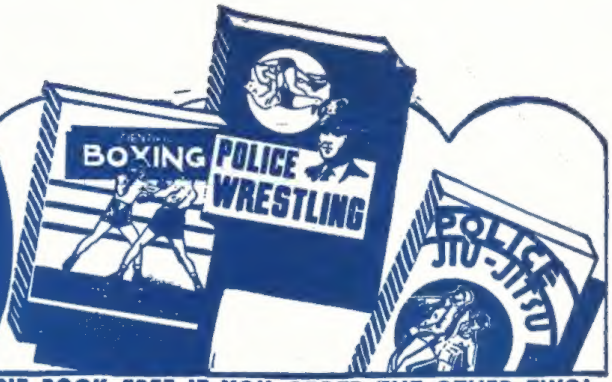

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